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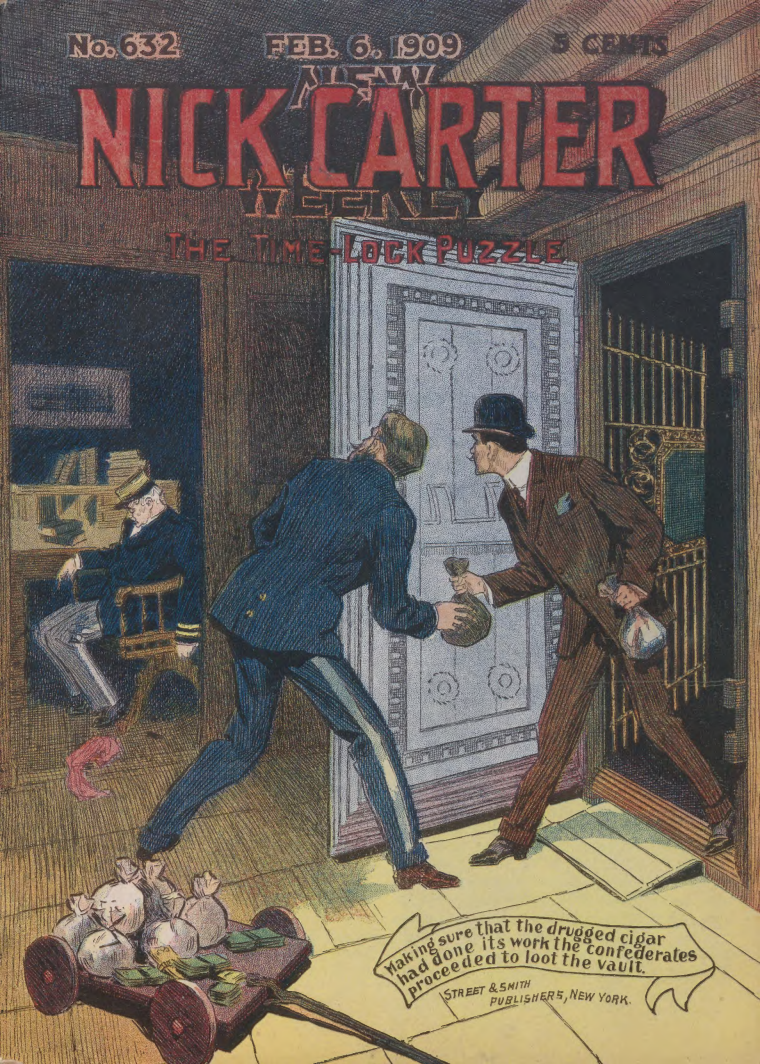
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE TIME-LOCK PUZZLE



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE TIME-LOCK PUZZLE;

OR,

Nick Carter's Bank-vault Case.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A SCENE INSIDE A BANK.

The Pontiac National Bank had closed its doors at noon on the particular Saturday to which we have reference now, but the time was closely approaching one o'clock in the afternoon, when the day's work was over, for a long line of depositors had been waiting to reach the windows of the paying-tellers when the outer doors were shut.

But the last man in line had been paid and was gone, and the employees of the bank, each anxious to get away, were hurrying through the cleaning-up process of the day in order to go about their several desires.

So apt were they and so thoroughly had each one looked ahead to this hour of deliverance until the succeeding Monday, that the closing duties were accomplished in a surprisingly short time, and by two o'clock the bank was deserted save for the two watchmen who assumed the duties of guardianship over its deserted interior.

Of these two men, named respectively Mike McGrath and Paul Meeker, a passing word is necessary.

McGrath was a brawny Irishman, who had been less than two years in this country and whose honesty and steadfastness to duty nobody had ever questioned; Meeker had already been twelve years in the employ of this particular institution, and had come to be recognized in his humble way as one of the pillars of the bank.

McGrath was literally a young giant in stature and physique, as good-natured as he was powerful; just a rollicking young Irishman who was ever ready to make friends, and who would hold them indefinitely if they were of the right sort.

Meeker was an undersized man much older than McGrath, whose beard had become prematurely white like his hair, but who, save for these two marks of advancing years, still looked younger than he really was.

His hair he kept rather closely cropped and his beard was always trimmed to a point, so that it was often remarked that if Meeker were to dress himself fastidiously he would have no difficulty in posing, so far as appearances went, as the president of a bank or of any other financial institution.

Formerly the directors of the Pontiac National Bank had kept but one watchman at a time on duty after its doors were closed for business, but rather more than a year before the events occurred which made this story possible, a series of bank robberies committed in other cities had impressed upon the directors of the

Pontiac the wisdom of keeping two men on duty, and hence the selection and appointment of Mike McGrath.

This particular Saturday, to which reference has been made, was so extremely stormy and forbidding that actually nobody ventured upon the street without necessity for it.

The wind tore with half-hurricane force through the narrow down-town streets, carrying with each gust clouds of flying snow which blinded the eyes and which drove everybody indoors with as little delay as possible.

To hold an umbrella aloft was impossible, and, no matter how tightly one's clothing was snugged about one's figure, the small particles of snow found their way inside, for it was fine and hard, and driven by a gale of wind that was bitterly cold and biting.

The interior of the bank referred to was not unlike that of any other institution which you might enter in the lower part of the city of New York.

Passing up half a dozen steps from the street and through the swinging doors which were all that impeded entrance during business hours, you entered upon the tiled and frescoed banking-room where the mahogany and steel wired partitions and windows divided it from that part where the customers, depositors, and patrons of the bank transacted their business.

The building was located on a corner which we need not name here for the reason that a substituted name has been given for the bank, it being deemed unwise for various reasons to be more explicit in this particular case.

It has been said that the interior of the bank was not unlike others of its kind, but there was one particular in which it was quite different, inasmuch as the president's private office was located at the front of the building with windows on either street at that corner.

Back of this, running along what we may call the side street, were the bookkeepers' desks, the tellers' cages, and so forth, and beyond all these, the cashier's office and then the directors' room.

After the final closing of the doors and the departure of the last employee of the bank, other than the two watchmen, the latter started upon their first round of the institution, a perfunctory duty intended to assure both men that everything was started clear and straight for the night; only that this being Saturday there would be now approximately forty hours before the bank would again open for the transaction of business.

Meeker had been a little bit late in arriving at the bank that day, and had only entered it just as the last of the clerks were taking their departure; but he had gone about his several duties at once, nodding to this and that one who addressed him, and as he was always a man of taciturn disposition this was not noticeable.

The duties of the two watchmen were such that there was no opportunity for conversation together until they should have made the rounds before referred to, but this being accomplished, McGrath went to the president's room at the front of the building and threw himself upon one of the comfortable chairs as he had been in the habit of doing every afternoon since his employment there.

The time being yet early in the day, the shades at the windows which were drawn up from rollers located at the bottom were raised to just such a height as would permit McGrath, seated as he was, to peer over the tops of them into the street beyond; and now, having seated himself, he produced his pipe and started to pack it full of tobacco with that leisurely satisfaction of manner which denotes pleasure.

He had filled it and packed it to his satisfaction, and was about to strike a match by rubbing it against his trouser leg when, from the doorway behind him, a voice admonished:

"Wait a minute, Mike. I have a fine cigar for you."

Somehow the voice sounded a bit unnatural to the big Irishman, and he turned swiftly, but only to grin a welcome to his fellow watchman who was coming slowly through the door with a huge cigar held forward in his right hand for the Irishman.

McGrath, as he turned, noticed that one side of Meeker's face was swollen out of all proportion to its natural size and shape, and Mike laughed in his hearty Irish manner as he exclaimed:

"Faith, Paul, ye give me a start, so ye did. Your voice sounded that unnatural; and by the same token ye look a bit unnatural at that. Is it a toothache ye have, Paul?"

"Yes," replied the other man, at the same time passing the cigar to McGrath; and he subsided moodily upon a chair in one corner of the room depositing his feet upon another and leaning the swollen side of his face upon the hollow of one hand.

"Does it hurt ye much, Paul," the big Irishman asked him, lighting the cigar with gusto.

The other man nodded without changing his position and grumbled something which McGrath understood to be an affirmative response.

"Sure, it's a good cigar ye gave me, Paul," said Mike presently. "Where did ye get it?"

"Oh, shut up. Don't talk to me!" growled the other watchman; and with a shrug of his shoulders and a short laugh, McGrath slid down a little lower in his chair until he rested his head comfortably against the back of it, and then he half-closed his eyes to enjoy the delicious fragrance of the cigar that had been bestowed upon him.

The position of Meeker was such that he could watch distinctly every move that McGrath might make while the latter, until he turned his head for the purpose, could not see Meeker at all.

And so they sat there in silence for a considerable length of time; a silence which was partly trying to McGrath because he had been in the habit of enjoying the first leisurely hour in conversation with his compatriot.

Once again somewhat drowsily he attempted to start a conversation with Meeker, but was cut off as he had been before with a surly response.

"Oh, don't talk to me," said Meeker. "Can't you see that I'm suffering tortures, Mike? It hurts me every time I open my mouth to speak."

McGrath shrugged his shoulders a second time and relapsed into silence, still in the enjoyment of the huge black cigar that had been given him.

If he had turned his head and opened his eyes; if he could have studied the aspect of Paul Meeker without being discovered in the act, he might have been startled by it.

There was no evidence of suffering on the face of the smaller of the two watchmen.

On the contrary he was leaning a little bit forward, his chin still resting in the hollow of his hand, but his eyes had narrowed and the expression of them suggested nothing so much as needle-pointed gimlets boring into the back of McGrath's head.

For more than half an hour he preserved this attitude without moving, but at the end of that time he said softly:

"McGrath, are you listening?"

There was no answer, and he waited another five minutes, when still speaking softly but with rather more eagerness than before, he said again:

"Mike, I say, Mike! Are you listening to me?"

This time a soft and comfortable snore was the only response he received, and his eyes lighted up with sudden energy as he started to his feet and crossed the room until he could bend over the recumbent form of the gigantic Hibernian.

For a moment he stood there regarding him in silence; then he removed an aluminum hollow bulb from one of his cheeks and restored it to a pocket from which it had been taken an hour earlier.

After that, with another studied glance at McGrath, he crossed the room to the window and stood there behind the partly raised curtain so that his head and shoulders projected above it, rendering him perfectly visible from the thoroughfare without.

As he stood there looking a policeman passed the bank, glanced upward, and nodded through the driving snow-storm at the watchman, who returned the greeting with a half-military salute.

Ten minutes later, while Meeker still occupied the same position by the window, a second person passed in the opposite direction. He also looked up and nodded, whereupon Meeker, without returning the salute, began stroking his pointed beard caressingly.

And so this second man passed into the obscurity of the storm while Meeker turned again to his soundly sleeping companion, whose cigar had dropped to the floor and gone out by this time, but now Meeker grasped him roughly by the shoulder and shook him, at the same time bending forward, exclaiming in his ear:

"Mike! Mike! Wake up! Wake up, you fool! Have you forgotten that you're a watchman! Wake up, I say! Mike!"

There was no answering gesture to this demand.

McGrath did not even grunt a recognition of this demand upon him, and after a moment Meeker stepped backward away from him, and there was a peculiar smile upon his face as he did so.

He crossed to the window and stood there as before until the same man, who had passed down the street a little while ago, returned in the opposite direction.

As before the man outside raised his head and nodded, and this time Paul Meeker gave a return salute.

The stranger passed on into the storm, and Paul Meeker withdrew from view at the window.

CHAPTER II.

A ROBBERY OF THE VAULT.

We have described to the reader in considerable detail in order that he may shrewdly guess at the explanation of the mystery which followed upon it.

That mystery we will now proceed to unfold, for

in a measure it was as astounding to Nick Carter as any that he had ever attempted to solve.

If we begin properly, it would be by saying that when the employees of the Pontiac National Bank arrived upon the scene Monday morning there appeared to be nothing amiss with the institution.

McGrath and Meeker were both there, the latter with a face which on one side was swollen most remarkably and in such a manner that he even had difficulty to speak, but he had managed to grumble an almost inaudible "good morning, sir," to Mr. Horlock, the president of the bank when he entered; and this happened just as Meeker, bundled to the ears of the still inclement weather which still continued, was in the act of leaving the bank.

And so he went out and drifted away into the obscurity of the storm which had now lasted intermittently for nearly two days.

McGrath was rather slower in taking his departure, and he had only just opened the front door in the act of passing out when a loud call from the interior of the bank arrested his footsteps and he turned back again.

We need not enter into details as to what occurred during the next few moments.

It is sufficient to say that a most mysterious robbery had occurred, and that almost every bit of cash that had been left in the vaults of that institution at the closing hour of Saturday had disappeared.

The strange part of it all was that nothing seemed to have been tampered with.

The time-lock on the big vault had worked at its appointed moment, but beyond those huge doors, when they were opened, it at once became evident that the place had been rifled of its negotiable contents.

Currency and specie had been removed; gold and paper money had disappeared; more than fourteen hundred thousand in cash was gone.

The excitement which obtained within the bank for a time after this stupendous discovery is indescribable.

It lacked yet almost half an hour before the front doors should be opened for the transaction of business, and during that time bank messengers were sent scurrying hither and yon to make ready for the demands which would necessarily be made by depositors in the early hours in the day; for it is always the policy of a bank to keep secret as long as possible an occurrence of this kind.

But in the meantime, Mike McGrath was detained and found himself seated, half-dazed by the calamity which had overtaken him, in the same chair where he had fallen asleep the preceding Saturday afternoon.

In the meantime, also, another messenger had been sent to summon Meeker to the bank. Police headquarters had been communicated with, and then President Horlock passed into the director's room at the rear, and from there called up Nick Carter, asking the detective as a special favor to come to the bank without delay.

When the detective arrived there, two Central Office men were already present, and the four, which included them, the president of the bank, and Nick Carter, seated themselves in the directors' room to discuss the matter of the strange robbery.

The stupefying fact of the whole occurrence was the mysterious method that had been employed.

Mr. Horlock assured the three detectives that both watchmen were at the bank when he arrived that morning; that nothing of unusual aspect was manifest to the eye in any part of the institution, and that the robbery had not been discovered until the tumblers of the time-lock of the vault had dropped into place and the doors of it had been opened in order to get at the books, and the cash for the day's business.

The two detectives from the Central Office were rather loudly of the opinion that the cash must have been taken before the vault was locked; in other words, they believed that the cash had not been put inside it at all; but the testimony of the tellers and other clerks and of the cashier when they were called into the directors' room, seemed to establish as strongly as anything could have done the fact that this opinion could not hold water unless, indeed, all the employees of the bank, or nearly all of them, were in league to rob it.

This idea, of course, could not be considered for a moment.

McGrath was brought into the room and questioned by one of the Central Office men, Nick Carter contenting himself with listening almost in an indifferent manner to the questions and answers.

But McGrath had no story to tell.

All that he could say about it was that he knew nothing about it.

He announced that he had arrived at the usual hour on Saturday, had taken up his duties as he always did, and had continued them until the arrival this particular morning of the regular employees of the bank.

When asked if Meeker had been with him all the time he replied in the affirmative, qualifying the statement only with the information that the other watch-

man had been suffering terribly with a toothache during all the time.

He asserted emphatically that no one had been inside the bank save themselves, and that neither of them had been outside the building during that time.

This last was in keeping with their instructions, for these watchmen were supposed to provide themselves with sufficient food to last during the long hours from Saturday afternoon till Monday morning. And they were expected to take turns in getting a few hours rest and sleep during the day of Sunday; one in the forenoon, the other in the afternoon.

When the Central Office man asked McGrath how he could possibly know that no one had entered the bank, or that Meeker had not gone out of it while he was sleeping, McGrath replied that he had not slept at all during the day of Sunday for the reason that Meeker was suffering so with a toothache that he had himself personally taken the entire responsibility of watching.

The two Central Office men made a thorough examination of the interior of the vault. They sounded almost every inch inside of it, for it was barely possible that burglars might have burrowed beneath it and have succeeded somehow in penetrating the flooring or walls of cement and Harveyized steel which protected it.

But nothing was found to indicate that it had even been attempted.

In fact, there was nothing whatever to show that the vault had been entered save only the fact that the valuable part of its contents had disappeared.

The Central Office men were plainly at fault, and they were compelled to admit it.

They looked at one another and then at the president of the bank, and beyond suggesting that the solution of the mystery could be found only inside the institution, they took their departure, ostensibly to report to their chief, but really convinced in their own minds—and not without logical reasoning—that the president and officers of the bank might themselves explain how the institution had been robbed were they so inclined.

It is so like the police when brought face to face with a robbery of this kind to fall at once upon the easiest solution of it, no matter how incredible or how unlikely it may appear, and without regard to whom it affects.

But these two men went away satisfied in their own minds that Charles Horlock, president of the bank, assisted by one or more of the officers or employees of it, had committed the robbery.

"There was no other way to do it," they told each other. "Time-locks don't work until the time is up for them to do so."

And so, shaking their heads wisely, they returned to headquarters to make their report.

Perhaps it did not occur to them that even the officials could not have robbed their own bank without the knowledge of their watchmen; or if the idea had occurred to them they could have explained by a shrug of the shoulders and the insinuation that men like those watchmen might easily be subsidized.

Nick Carter remained in the directors' room of the bank after the two Central Office men had taken their departure.

He and the president were seated opposite each other at the long and massive directors' table upon which Horlock was tapping impatiently with his pencil, gazing moodily into the fire of Tennessee coal which burned in the open grate.

Nick remained silent with his eyes fixed upon the president, watching his every move and expression, for it cannot be denied that the same idea that had suggested itself to the Central Office men had touched him.

But as he watched the man he dismissed it; however, he preferred to wait until the president of the bank should break the silence, which he did at last by asking abruptly:

"What do you think about it, Carter?"

"I don't know," was the instant reply.

"Haven't you any theories?"

"No; not yet."

"But the cash has disappeared."

"Yes," replied Nick laconically.

"It was all deposited in that vault before we closed on Saturday."

"I haven't a doubt of it, Mr. Horlock."

"It couldn't get out of that vault without hands to take it out."

"Not by any method that we know of at present."

"And the time-lock is supposed to effectively bar any admission to the vault between hours."

Nick settled himself back in his chair and speaking with slow deliberation, said:

"Mr. Horlock, nine out of every ten men whom you might select would tell you off-hand that this robbery, which we know to have taken place, would be utterly impossible without the connivance of certain officials

of the bank; and that is the opinion which those two Central Office men carried away with them."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the president, leaning forward with his elbows on the table in front of him.

"I mean," said Nick, still speaking with deliberation, "that they are of the opinion that ninety men out of a hundred would have regarding this affair."

"And that opinion is—what?"

"It is that the robbery of this bank, discovered this morning, should be directly traceable to the man or men who have charge of setting the time-lock of that vault; to that man or men, and possibly one or more others who are associated with the institution, and who on this occasion must have acted as their confederates."

"And have you adopted that theory, Mr. Carter?" demanded the president, with his eyes fixed sternly upon the detective.

"No."

"Do you think those Central Office men did so?"

"Without doubt."

"How are we to get at the truth of this matter?"

"I can't answer that question just yet, Mr. Horlock, but I should say that the first step would be to call in an expert from the firm who made that time-lock to have it removed and thoroughly examined, and to let me be present while that removal and examination is going on. It is barely possible, sir, that we might during that proceeding obtain some information which would point toward a solution of this case."

"I haven't thought of that," said the president.

"If you will use the telephone, Mr. Horlock, and will request that one or two experts be sent here at once their efforts may assist me materially in the work I have to do."

"But," said the president, "even if we discovered that the lock had somehow been tampered with, and by that means the robbery made possible, how are we then to account for the total ignorance of my two watchmen?"

"I am not yet satisfied of the entire ignorance of the watchmen, Mr. Horlock," replied the detective, with an enigmatical smile.

CHAPTER III.

THE TIME-LOCK EXPERT.

If we were to go into detail with a graphic description of just what occurred during the examination of the time-lock on the vault, it would be so technical that nobody but a person experienced in such matters would be able to comprehend it.

It is sufficient to state that when the lock was taken apart and subjected to thorough examination nothing was found until the expert, in putting the lock together again, suddenly uttered an exclamation and called Nick Carter's attention to a very slight and almost imperceptible scratch upon the works near the regulator of the clock.

Nick, who saw nothing unusual about it, asked the expert what the scratch indicated to him, and received this reply:

"I installed and regulated this lock myself when it was placed here, Mr. Carter. The scratch was not there at the time, and it should not have been produced there since unless some one has tampered with the lock."

"Suppose some one has done so, what could they accomplish?"

The expert shook his head doubtfully and replied:

"I don't know what might have been done."

"What could you do with the lock if you made an effort?"

The man laughed.

"I could do almost anything with it," he said.

"Could you for instance make the works travel very much faster than they do naturally?"

"Easily."

"How?"

"By tightening the spring and by moving that regulator as far as it will go."

"How greatly could you increase the speed of the clock in that way—I mean the ratio of its speed?"

"I could double it."

"Do you mean that you could make the hour hand go twice around the dial in twelve hours instead of once?"

"Yes."

"But in order to accomplish such a thing," said the detective, "you would have to get inside the vault door to get at the lock, wouldn't you?"

"Certainly."

"Then it follows, doesn't it, that if that lock has been tampered with it must have been done by a man who is an expert, and it must have been accomplished while the vault doors were standing open during the day when the bank was open for business and when all the employees were busily engaged in their several occupations?"

"Without doubt, Mr. Carter."

"It seems then impossible, does it not?"

The expert looked around him a moment, smiled, and replied:

"It looks to me as if it were the impossible with which we have to contend at the present time, Mr. Carter."

"Suppose," said Nick, "that you, being the expert, were one of the employees of this bank; suppose that you had determined to interfere with the operation of that lock in some manner; suppose for example that you were here Saturday during banking hours, and that you desired to fix that lock so that it would open at some hour Sunday instead of this morning at half-past nine; how would you accomplish it and how much time would it take to do so?"

The man hesitated before he replied, and then he said:

"If I could work without interference, I could accomplish it in about ten minutes, but since you have asked me the question as you did by saying 'how would you accomplish it,' I will add that it might consume two or three hours of time for me to do so, and that in order to accomplish it even in that length of time it would be necessary that I should have free access to the vault without question or suspicion on the part of any of the other employees."

"I think I understand you," said Nick.

"Yes?" replied the expert.

"You mean, do you not, that as an employee it would be necessary that you should be such a one as could pass in and out of that vault without being questioned?"

"Yes."

"Very well, we will pass from that point. Now, I will ask you something else."

"Very well."

"Supposing yourself to be such an employee as we have described and to have the intention that I have outlined, how would you proceed in order to accomplish it?"

"I would——" began the expert, but the detective interrupted him.

"Wait," he said, "instead of describing to me what you would do, show me."

"Eh? Just what do you mean, Mr. Carter?"

Nick pointed at the satchel full of tools that the expert had brought with him, and replied:

"You have there all the tools that you require, I fancy?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Now restore the lock to its place on the vault door, and then show me exactly what you would do in order to carry out such an intention as we have outlined."

"I am afraid," said the expert with some reluctance, "that in order to do that, we must work directly under the eyes of the clerks who are busy in the bank now."

"Never mind," said Nick. "Show me."

So the lock was restored to its place. Several of the clerks were instructed to keep away from the vault while they were working, and the operation began.

During it the expert utilized only two separate tools, and each was a small screw-driver in appearance like those in use by opticians, only they were much stronger and better made.

From the moment he began until he announced that it had been accomplished, Nick Carter timed him, and there was a lapse of a little less than an hour.

During the time the expert passed in and out of the vault door at frequent intervals. Each time he passed the lock he made use of one or the other of the small screw-drivers which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. Each time he passed the lock he made a turn or two with one of these little instruments, and during all the time Nick Carter remained inside the vault, closely watching the proceeding.

At last the moment came when the expert used up a full minute of time in removing the plate he had loosened by taking several quick turns with one of his screw-drivers and in replacing the plate quite loosely. Then the balance of the time was used in again tightening the screws which he had loosened before the plate was removed.

When it was accomplished he turned to the detective—they were alone inside the vault at the moment—and said:

"You will observe, Mr. Carter, that the only time when I have been detained here long enough to run any risk of discovery in what I am doing, was when I removed the plate and made a few turns and touches inside the mechanicism of the lock?"

"Yes," replied the detective.

"That," continued the expert, "would be a chance which the operator would be obliged to take; but he could watch his opportunity and, take it."

The detective nodded.

"And what have you accomplished with the lock?"

"I have fixed it so that if it were set now to open at half-past nine of the day after to-morrow, the clock would have traveled the required distance some time during the day to-morrow."

"But you do not know at what time of the day to-morrow?"

"Late in the afternoon or early in the evening, I should say."

The detective pondered a moment, then he asked:

"The rearrangement of that clock as you have fixed it now would necessitate that it should be done just before the clock and lock were set to open, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"And wouldn't that require that the person who tampered with it should have done his work almost at the last minute before the closing of the bank on Saturday?"

"Yes; so that he should have concluded his work within a half-hour from the time of closing; but an idea occurs to me right here, Mr. Carter."

"Well, what is it?"

"The hour before closing would be the best time for such a man to work, because already the documents are being placed in the vault for their long rest until Monday. The man who did the work would be less observed if he entered the vault frequently at such a time."

"Yes, I think so myself," said the detective.

"Well, sir, that is the only explanation that I can give you of what has doubtless happened."

"You may restore the lock to its natural state," the detective told the expert then, and he returned to the president's room where Mike McGrath still occupied a chair in one corner looking deeply troubled and ill at ease.

"You might send this man into the directors' room, Mr. Horlock," the detective said, indicating McGrath. "I shall follow him in presently and have a talk with him, but in the meantime there are some questions that I would like to ask you."

"Very well," said the president, "what are they?"

"I would like to know in the first place what is the exact method by which books and cash and other things are deposited in the vault before closing-time on Saturdays."

"Why, there is no particular method about it, Mr. Carter."

"But there must be a method."

"Each book when it is closed, that is to say when the one who works upon it is through with it for the day, is put in its allotted place inside the vault——"

"Who puts it there, Mr. Horlock?"

"Usually the man who has been working upon it."

"You make use of the word 'usually'; when he does not do that, who does it for him?"

"McGrath or Meeker. At that time they are usually here and ready to be handy in anything they are told to do."

"And if not McGrath or Meeker, who then?"

"One or two of the three messengers we employ here."

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Horlock, who was it who was most busily engaged in placing books in the vault last Saturday?"

"I don't know, Mr. Carter, but I can easily find out," and he pressed a button that was beside him attached to his desk.

One of the messengers of the bank responded, and the president asked him:

"Who worked inside the bank putting books in the vault on Saturday?"

"I did, part of the time, sir."

"Who else, who did the most of it?"

"Burns."

"Send Burns in to me. I want to speak to him."

"He's not here to-day, sir."

"Not here! Where is he?"

"He sent word to the cashier that he was ill and wouldn't be able to be down to-day."

"Do you know where he lives?" interposed the detective.

"Yes, sir."

"Step outside and wait at the door until I call you. Now, Mr. Horlock," continued the detective after the messenger had gone out. "What do you know about this man Burns? How long has he worked for you?"

"He has been here only three or four months, but he came very highly recommended," was the reply.

"Recommended by whom?"

"Oh, I don't remember, Mr. Carter. My cashier attends to those matters."

"I think it would be well," said the detective, "if you should use that telephone at your elbow, communicate with headquarters and ask the commissioner to send you down another special man. When he comes, send him with this messenger, who is outside the door, and have Burns brought here without delay."

"Good heavens, Carter!" exclaimed the president. "You don't suppose that Burns——"

There was a tap against the door and it opened, admitting the head and shoulders of the messenger with

whom the president had just been talking, and he announced:

"Excuse me, Mr. Horlock, but Burns has just come in. I thought, perhaps, you'd like to know."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUSPECTED BANK MESSENGER.

The president of the bank looked at Nick Carter and smiled when this announcement was made, but the detective, without change of countenance, said to him:

"I wish you'd call Burns in here at once, Mr. Horlock. I'd like to talk with him."

And when Burns stood opposite him waiting, he added:

"Burns, how long is it since you were employed as an expert mechanic in the manufacture of time-locks?"

Without a change of countenance the man replied:

"I was never so employed, sir."

"Weren't you ever a lock-maker?"

"No, sir."

"What was your employment before you came here?"

"I was a bank messenger in San Francisco."

"Was it from that bank that you brought your letters of recommendation to this institution?"

"That and two others; yes."

"How long have you been here?"

"About three months."

"Why did you leave the employ of the other bank?"

"Merely because I wished to come East; merely because I wished to live in New York."

"Where did you obtain all the knowledge you possess regarding the mechanism of locks, Mr. Burns?"

"I don't possess any knowledge about them at all, sir," was the cool and calm reply.

"Burns," said the detective sternly, "I am very much inclined at this moment to place you under arrest without any more knowledge concerning you than mere suspicion; but that suspicion is founded upon circumstances which would uphold me in the act if I should undertake it. It may not be necessary, however, to subject you to such an indignity, at least at the present time."

"I don't know why I should be placed under arrest," with some haughtiness in his manner and with an indignant glance toward the president of the bank.

"How were you employed during the last hour or two of business in this bank last Saturday?" asked the detective.

"In the usual manner," was the cool reply.

"What is the usual manner?"

"I was inside the bank behind the partition waiting there to do anything I was told to do."

"It was part of your duty, wasn't it, to carry books into the vault and deposit them there?"

"Certainly."

"How many such visits do you suppose you made to the interior of the vault between eleven and half-past twelve Saturday?"

"I haven't the least idea, sir. I didn't count them."

"As many as a dozen, perhaps?" asked Nick.

"Possibly; perhaps more."

"Have you with you in your possession at the present moment the small screw-drivers much like those used by opticians?"

"I don't understand you, sir," was the perfectly cool response.

"You had such an article or two with you when you were at the bank on Saturday, didn't you?"

"No, sir, I never had such an article in my possession in my life."

"What did you do with them?"

"Since I did not have them, I did nothing with them."

"What time did you leave the bank last Saturday?"

"I left at half-past twelve; I was told that I would not be needed again."

"Where did you go after you left here?"

"To the house where I board."

"What did you do then?"

"I stayed there. It was very stormy, and I didn't care to go out."

"Who did you see that evening?"

"Nobody at all save only the people who live in the same house with me."

"Who did you communicate with by telephone, or otherwise?"

"Nobody."

Nick turned to the president of the bank and said:

"Mr. Horlock, there have been developments this morning which hold me to suspect this man here with complicity in the robbery that has occurred."

He raised his hand deprecatingly when the latter was about to interrupt, and went on calmly.

"It is possible that I am doing him a great wrong but, nevertheless, I deem it wise to act as I do in this matter. I do not wish at once to place Burns under

arrest, but I will ask you to order him into the directors' room and tell him not to leave the bank again until it closes this afternoon. In the meantime, I will have decided what is best."

"Burns," said the president, "you heard what Mr. Carter said?"

"I did, sir, and it is an outrage that I should be subjected to any such suspicion."

"Are you quite willing to do as he has suggested rather than be subjected to immediate arrest?"

"Certainly, if it is your desire."

"Then do so, Burns. I am sorry that this suspicion has fallen upon you, but unless you tell about it yourself we three are the only ones who will know about it unless there are further developments. That will do for the present, Burns. You may take a seat in the directors' room and wait there until further orders."

The moment the door closed behind the suspected messenger, the detective said to the president:

"Now, sir, unless I am greatly mistaken, that man, Burns, will remain for an hour or two or three quietly seated in the directors' room where we have sent him; but as soon as he thinks that he may do so without attracting attention, he will seek an opportunity to leave the building, and that is precisely what I wish him to do."

"Well," smiled the president. "If that is what you wish him to do, why didn't you send him at once?"

"Because I want him to leave the bank feeling that he is under suspicion; and just now, if you will excuse me for a moment, I will myself step outside."

The detective arose without waiting for a reply and passed to the front steps of the building, where Patsy was standing stamping his feet to keep them warm, for the air was still bitterly cold.

"Patsy," said Nick, "have you kept tabs on every one who has entered the bank since you stood here?"

"Sure thing," replied the second assistant.

"One of the messengers just entered, Patsy, and he went directly into the president's room where I was seated. I want to know if you noticed him?"

"Yes; his name is Burns. I asked about him."

"Well, the likelihood is that he will sneak out of the bank during the next hour or two or three, and, if he does so, I want you to follow him. That's all."

Reentering the president's office then, the detective announced:

"Now, Mr. Horlock, I am going to take McGrath out of the building. I want to have quite a lengthy conversation with him, and I prefer not to have it here. I will be back within an hour or two, and, if in the meantime the other night watchman, Meeker, should be brought here, I wish him to be detained until I come."

Fifteen minutes later Nick Carter and the night watchman, McGrath, were seated at a table facing each other in an obscure corner of a near-by café, and Nick began the series of questions propounded to the Irishman from which he expected considerable information to develop.

If the reader should think that Nick Carter went about his search for information in an obscure and roundabout way, the fact must be attributed to the character with whom he had to deal; for Nick Carter always carefully studied his man before subjecting him to such an ordeal.

The detective's theory was, and is, that a man placed in the position of Michael McGrath at that moment inevitably possesses more knowledge than he realizes; for he has a subconscious information concerning certain points which have not as yet established themselves sufficiently strong to form a belief. On this basis he began as follows:

"McGrath, I take you to be an honest man."

"I am, sir; please Heaven."

"You wouldn't steal so much as a penny from anybody, would you?"

"I would not. I never did, and I don't propose to begin."

"And you would not permit any one else to steal if you knew about it or suspected it, would you?"

"That I wouldn't, sir."

"Do you know who I am, McGrath?"

"Sure, I know your name is Nick Carter; that you're a detective; but that's all."

"Do you know why I was at the bank this morning?"

"Well, sir, I wouldn't have to be very smart to guess that."

"Do you know anything about that robbery, McGrath?"

"Not a thing in life, sir."

"Have you any suspicions about it?"

"Not one, sir."

"But you have not told all the truth after you reported at the bank Saturday afternoon?"

"Save a little nap I took in a chair in the president's room, sir, I did."

"Oh," said the detective, "that is interesting. What about that nap, Michael?"

"Oh, I just dozed off a bit, sir."

"When was that?"

"Right after I reported there."

"How long after you reported? Be as exact as you can."

"Maybe a half an hour, sir; maybe a little more, sir; no less."

"Is it customary for you to take a nap in one of the chairs of the president's private office after you report there for duty?"

"I never did such a thing before in my life, sir."

"How did you happen to do it last Saturday afternoon?"

"Faith, I don't know, sir. It was funny, sir, so it was."

"Tell me about it. Tell me in your own way and exactly how it happened."

"Well, sir, it was this way: When everybody had gone out of the bank I went about me duties seeing that everything was straight and clear for the night. That is something that I always do, sir; and when I'd finished with them I went into the president's office and sat down in one of the easy chairs behind the curtain. I guess I must have felt drowsy. Maybe it was the cold and the blustering wind. Anyhow, when Paul Meeker came in I just let meself drop off into slumber, and, sure, sir, when I woke up, I'd been asleep two hours and a half."

"Meeker had not awakened you, eh?"

"No, sir; it wasn't necessary. He said he thought he'd let me sleep all I wanted to just then, being as how he had a toothache himself and was likely to get worse so that I might not be able to take my usual nap on Sunday."

"Did you take anything before you went to sleep, Mike? Anything to drink?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Didn't you do anything at all, but simply sit down there and drop asleep?"

"Oh, well, I lighted a big cigar that Meeker gave to me, but that's all."

"A cigar that Meeker gave to you, eh?" said Nick.

"Yes, sir, and it was a dandy," was the reply.

CHAPTER V.

THE DRUGGED CIGARS.

"Now, McGrath," said the detective, after a moment's pause, "I want you to commence at the time when you woke up after the nap you took in the chair in the president's room, and go over in detail everything that occurred to you and to Meeker, as far as you know up to the time when he left the bank this morning."

"Yes, sir; I can do that dead easy."

"Well, go ahead, then."

"I woke up yawning and stretching to beat the band, Mr. Carter. Faith, it was a sound sleep that I had, and I was that drowsy still that I couldn't keep my mouth closed for two minutes at a time."

"Well, what then?"

"It was getting late in the afternoon outside, sir. The storm was still howling through the streets, and the snow seemed to be thicker than ever. I stepped to the window and looked out, and then I turned and gave Meeker a good cussin' for letting me sleep so long."

"What did he say?"

"He only laughed at first; then he told me that I ought to be glad that he let me sleep and said it would do me good. I asked him what he supposed made me go to sleep that way, and he said he thought it was the bitter cold outside."

"Well, then what?"

"He said he just came back into the room when I woke up, and so we sat there and talked together for an hour."

"His toothache was better then?"

"Not very much. He groaned about it considerable; I said we talked together; in fact, it was I who did most of the talking, for he only growled out surly replies which wasn't like him a bit."

"Wasn't he doing anything for the toothache?"

"Sure, while I was sleeping he had gone into the wash-room and tied a towel around his head, and with the swelling on his face he looked so funny that I laughed at him; and sure, sir, the place smelled like a hospital with the things he used on it."

"Well, what did you do then?"

"I wanted him to go into the directors' room and play seven-up with me. We sometimes do that, but he said his tooth ached so bad he couldn't, and when it come time to take a bite to eat in the evening, sure, he couldn't swallow a mouthful of food, because his tooth was so bad. I told him to lie down and take a nap, which he tried to do, but his tooth ached so that he couldn't sleep.

"Then by and by I wanted another smoke, and I remembered that I hadn't half-finished the cigar he gave me, so I looked around for it, Mr. Carter, but it was gone. I was mad at that, because I hadn't finished it, and when I asked Meeker about it, he said he'd

thrown it away, but he told me if I'd help him out with his toothache and let him rest all he could he had another one for me for the next morning after we'd eaten our breakfast."

"It was night by that time, wasn't it?" asked Nick.

"It was, sir."

"Did anything happen during the night?"

"Not a thing."

"Did you go to sleep again?"

"I did not until the next day."

"Do you remember that you felt drowsy during that evening?"

"Not a mite, sir, no more than I do now. Not half so much in fact, for I am dead for sleep."

"What time did you take a nap on Sunday?"

"It was in the middle of the forenoon, sir."

"Don't you know what time it was?"

"It wasn't long after I had marked my clock for ten, sir."

"What time did you wake up?"

"It was almost one, Mr. Carter."

"So you slept nearly three hours?"

"I did, sir."

"McGrath, this doesn't agree with the story you told the Central Office man."

"No, sir, it doesn't, but somehow I didn't think it necessary to tell him *everything* I knew, and, besides, the president was in the room, and I didn't want to talk about it; at least, not before those officers. But the fact is that I did sleep some on Sunday."

"How long do you usually sleep at such times?"

"Just about that long, sir; about three hours."

"Your clock is not marked at such times, is it?"

"No, sir, but it's an understood thing that we can each take a few hours sleep during Sunday while the other one keeps watch."

"Did you smoke that other cigar that Meeker had talked about before you went to sleep?"

"I did that; about half of it."

"And when did you smoke the other half of it?"

"I didn't smoke it at all, sir."

"Why not?"

"Sure, Meeker threw it away the same as he did the other one."

"Did you go to sleep immediately after smoking it?"

"I think I did, sir."

"Was Meeker with you when you laid down?"

"No, sir; I stretched out on the sofa in the directors' room, and he was in the president's room at the front of the building."

"When you awakened, were you alone?"

"I was."

"What did you do then?"

"I went outside the room looking for Meeker."

"Where was he?"

"He was in the president's room sound asleep in the same chair where I went to sleep the first time, but he woke up the moment I entered the room and he began to swear at me for waking him, saying that it was the first sleep he had."

"McGrath, during all that time, did you notice anything peculiar about Paul Meeker?"

"No, sir; barring his toothache."

"Did he still keep the towel tied around his head?"

"He did, sir; and the place smelled like the health department."

"Now, what happened after that?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"You still insist upon what you say that neither of you left the building at all?"

"Neither of us left the building. I know that."

"How do you know that Meeker didn't go out while you were asleep?"

"Well, sir, he said he didn't, and it was against orders, anyhow, so I don't think he did."

"But as a matter of fact you do not know, do you?"

"Only what I have told you."

"Now, McGrath, are you positive that those three hours between ten and one on Sunday and between two and four Saturday afternoon were the only times when you were not awake and entirely alert?"

"I'm just as sure of it as that I am sitting here, sir."

"During the hours when you were awake, did you at any time see any one loitering near the bank in the street?"

"I did not."

"Were either of the telephones in the bank used between Saturday afternoon and Monday morning?"

"They were not."

"Did you know Meeker before you came here to work, McGrath?"

"No, sir; I did not."

"Have you known him outside of that institution since you have been there?"

"No, sir."

"Have you never met him anywhere or seen him anywhere than inside the bank?"

"I never did."

"Then your acquaintance with him is solely of a business character?"

"Well, I don't know that you could call it a business character, sir. We are simply two watchmen there

together. Our duties call us there every day at half-past two except Saturday, when we are supposed to arrive there at twelve or very soon after it. We remain there together through the week until the arrival of the president or the cashier of the bank in the morning. Sunday we remain inside the bank without leaving it at all, and we take food enough there to get us over the time. We each have our own watchman's clock to mark at specified hours, and we each have a printed report to fill out, which is turned in to the cashier of the bank in the morning. That, sir, is all we have to do."

"And that is all you know about Meeker, is it?"

"Yes, sir. I never saw the man until I went there to work, but he has always been nice to me, and we have got along without ever a cross word between us."

"Do you think he is an honest man, McGrath?"

"I do, sir."

"Have you ever seen anything about him or his conduct to suggest otherwise?"

"Never."

"You said you play cards together sometimes?"

"Yes, sir; back in the directors' room. We often have a game of seven-up; sometimes it's dominoes and sometimes it's checkers. Mr. Horlock and the cashier, too, know about it and don't object."

"Do they know that you smoke in the bank?"

"Sure, sir, I asked permission about that when I went to work there. I wouldn't do anything inside the bank that they didn't know about."

"Did you make any search, McGrath, for those two half-smoked cigars that Meeker gave you?"

"I did at the time, but I couldn't find them."

"Where were they?"

"Sure, I haven't an idea unless he ground them up to put into his own pipe."

"What did he say he did with them when you asked him about them?"

"He didn't say anything at all about them, and he was that surly that I didn't question him."

"I'd like to find one of those half-smoked cigars, McGrath."

"Would you, indeed, sir. Faith, so would I. They were the best ever."

"It's my opinion, McGrath, that they were drugged."

"What's that, sir? Drugged is it?"

"Yes."

"And who would drug them, I'd like to know?"

"Meeker."

"What for, sir?"

"To make you sleep."

"And what for would he want me to sleep, sir, him having a toothache?"

"To keep you quiet, Mike, while he made arrangements for robbing the bank. That was the first cigar. To keep you quiet while the bank was robbed; that was the second cigar."

McGrath started to his feet, dropping his fist upon the table with a bang.

"I'd never believe it in a million years, sir."

"But the bank was robbed, wasn't it?"

"So they tell me. Faith, I don't know."

"It wasn't robbed while you were awake, was it?"

"Begorra, I'll swear that it wasn't."

"Well, in that case, it was robbed while you were asleep."

"Sure, sir, it's all a great big riddle to me. I think I know an honest man when I see him, and divil a bit could ye make me believe that Paul Meeker is a thief. It's true, sir, I never saw him outside the bank even to pass him on the street, but he's a fine man if ever there was one, and he's always been like a saint in his treatment of me. He comes to the bank on time, and when we ain't chatting together about some of his travels and his studies, sure, he's poring over one of the books he likes to study or he's reading the papers, and he's that quietlike and lamblike that he wouldn't hurt a fly if it crawled on him. No, sir, you couldn't make me believe, not in a million years, that Paul Meeker is a thief, or that he has got anything in common with thieves. He ain't that kind of a man at all, at all, and I never would believe it."

"But the bank was robbed," insisted Nick, returning to the previous statement.

"That's what they tell me, sir, but sure, I don't know anything about it. Maybe it was robbed and maybe it wasn't. And if it was robbed, there's them that is higher up in front than I am who could tell more about it than I'm able to do."

"What do you mean by that remark, McGrath?"

"Sure, I don't mean anything by it."

"Did any official of that bank go near it or approach it between last Saturday when it closed and this morning when it opened?"

"No, sir; not to my knowledge."

"Then what did you have in mind when you made that remark just now?"

"Only the strangeness of the whole thing, Mr. Carter."

"What do you mean by the strangeness of it?"

"Well, sir, there's a lock on the door of that vault

which won't open at all, only when the clock that's fixed to it says it can, and when the doors of that vault are closed, sure the lock is on the inside of it as tight as the money is. Who is going to get at that lock to monkey with it, I want to know, unless it's the ones who have it in charge to fix it and set it and wind it and do other things to it?"

"But," said Nick, smiling, "even though your theory is correct, McGrath, the robbery is still a fact, and it would have had to occur while you were asleep, since you swear that it did not occur while you were awake."

"Well, sir, what of that?"

"Why, even in that case, Paul Meeker might still have drugged you in order that you would know nothing about what was going on."

For a moment the watchman looked puzzled then visibly brightening, he announced:

"Maybe, sir, he was drugged, too."

"Perhaps," said Nick, laughing. "With one of his own cigars."

CHAPTER VI.

PAUL MEEKER'S ALIBI.

The detective believed that he had gathered enough from his conversation with McGrath to understand fairly well how the wind blew, and so with a few more words of admonition to the gigantic watchman, he returned to the bank.

He had no sooner entered the door than one of the messengers came to him with the information that Mr. Horlock would like to see him at once in the private office.

Going there he found, seated upon one of the chairs, a small, white-haired, white-bearded man of a decidedly scholarly appearance, who did not at all resemble what he was—a watchman.

But the man was Meeker, nevertheless.

He had been found at his home by the officer who had been sent after him, and it was a strange tale that the officer heard when he got there.

Paul Meeker lived alone in two rooms at the top of a tenement-house on the East Side of the city, and the story he told the officer was to the effect that—but we will let him tell it in his own way, just as Nick Carter got it from him by dint of severe questioning.

"This is Paul Meeker, Mr. Carter," said Horlock, as soon as the detective entered the room. "He tells a strange story; one that I would regard as incredible if it came from any other source than Meeker; but Meeker has been with us twelve years, and I have never found him wanting in any particular. Perhaps, instead of telling you what he has said, I had better let him tell it to you in his own way."

"Decidedly," said the detective. "Now, what is it, Mr. Meeker?"

"I scarcely know what to say to you, Mr. Carter," responded the watchman. "I am still so completely dazed by what I have heard——"

"Yes; but we will skip all that. I suppose you refer to the robbery?"

"Yes, sir."

"And naturally you insist that you knew nothing about it till you were told, after you arrived here today."

"Naturally; since it is the truth."

"I want you to tell me everything that occurred here, from the time of your arrival at the bank Saturday afternoon, until——"

"That is just the point, sir," the man interrupted him. "I did *not arrive here at all* on Saturday afternoon."

"Eh? What is that? What do you mean?"

"Just what I say, sir. I did not come to the bank Saturday afternoon."

"What do you mean by making such an assertion as that, Meeker?" demanded the detective coldly.

"It is the absolute truth, Mr. Carter."

"How can it be the truth, man? McGrath says that you were here. You were seen by others to enter the bank. You were here when the president himself left it, that afternoon. You were here all that night, all the next day, and all the night following with Mike——"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, Mr. Carter, but I was not here at all," said Meeker.

"Then where were you?"

"In my room, drugged and tied to my bed, from which I was not released until late last night."

The detective smiled incredulously; then he said quietly:

"Tell me all about it, if you please."

"That is the trouble, sir; there is nothing about it that I can tell you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that there is nothing about it that I know; so if I do not know, how can I tell you?"

"You must know *something* about what you say happened to you, man."

"I do not."

"I suppose you left the bank at the usual time, Saturday morning, did you not?" asked Nick.

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you go then?"

"Directly to my home."

"And what did you do then?"

"I prepared something to eat, as is my custom on arriving at my rooms after leaving the bank in the morning."

"Well? And then?"

"I ate what I had prepared; I smoked and then I went to bed, following out the custom of my every-day practises. This never varies save on Sunday mornings, when I remain here."

"Well, what happened then?"

"Nothing; I went to sleep."

"When did you awaken?"

"Some time very late in the afternoon of yesterday."

"Are you accustomed to oversleeping like that?" asked the detective, not without a suggestion of sarcasm in his voice.

"No, sir."

"What wakened you?"

"I don't know. I think I struggled back to my senses, for I had not been what you would correctly call sleeping. I had been unconscious, from the influence of a drug."

"How do you know that?"

"Because of several reasons. In the first place I was so tightly bound to my bed that I could move but a very little; a gag had been thrust into my mouth and fastened there so I was prevented from crying out an alarm, and lastly my head seemed bursting with the pain in it, and I was suffering from a nausea too terrible to describe."

The look of incredulity on the face of the detective must have been plainly evident, for Meeker drew back a little as he said:

"I see that you do not believe me, sir, but what I tell you is the truth. By great and continued effort, which occupied hours, I finally succeeded in loosing the gag so that I could call out, and it was about eleven o'clock in the evening when I succeeded in attracting attention and calling some one to my aid."

"Well? Go on with your story. What then?"

"When I was finally released, I tried to get up, but I was so weak and so stiff from the long confinement that it was impossible. Those who rescued me from my plight say that I relapsed into unconsciousness; that I fainted."

"And you recovered again—when?"

"Toward morning. I asked what time it was and then what day it was. When told, I was overwhelmed. But I struggled with my condition as best I could. I had just found courage to get up and to try to get into my clothes when the officer arrived."

"So; that is your story, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you had a toothache lately?"

"No, sir. I never had a toothache in my life that I recall."

"Supposing what you tell me to be true, that you were drugged and left unconscious on your bed from Saturday morning until Sunday night, you are still in the unfortunate position of having nobody ready to prove this assertion, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nobody saw you there until rescuers came to your assistance last night?"

"No."

"And that was in response to your calls, was it not?"

"Yes."

The detective turned to the president of the bank.

"Please send out for McGrath," he said. "I have fortunately detained him here."

McGrath entered a moment later, and upon seeing Meeker there, stepped forward at once and extended his huge paw of a hand.

"Hello, Paul," he said. "Sure I'm sorry to see you lookin' so bad, so I am. What's up?"

"Mike," said the detective before the other watchman could reply, "Meeker says that he did not come to the bank Saturday afternoon; that he was not here Saturday night and Sunday and in fact has not been here at all since he left the bank Saturday morning, about nine-thirty. What have you to say to that?"

McGrath looked from the detective to Meeker and then back again to the detective; and all the time his features were working as if he was comprehending what had been said to him but slowly. Finally——

"Does he say that, Mr. Carter?"

"He does."

"And ye want to know my opinion of the statement? Is that it?"

"It is."

"Then my opinion of it is that it's a lie! Faith, haven't I me two eyes in me head to prove that he was here? Haven't I me senses and the mimmory of that cigar? Sure, don't I know the man when

I see him? Is it a blasted fool that he's after taking me for I'd like to know? Look here, Meeker, what the divil do you mean by telling any such cock-and-bull story as that is? Weren't ye here and didn't ye have the toothache to beat the band? Aw, what's ailing ye anyhow?"

"Mike, listen to me. I was not here. If you thought I was here and still think so, it must be because some other person passed himself off in my stead. It was not I."

"Divil a bit do I believe that same, Paul."

Meeker turned a pleading glance upon the detective and asked:

"Mr. Carter, will you permit me to question McGrath in my own way, please?"

"Yes; go ahead."

"I think I can convince him that it was not I who was here, when he supposes I was."

"Very well. You may make the effort."

"Mike," said Meeker, again addressing the other watchman, "look at me."

"Sure, I'm looking with both me two eyes, so I am."

"I am Paul Meeker, am I not?"

"Faith, I'm beginning to doubt me own senses. Ye don't look much like the Paul Meeker who went away from the bank this morning."

"Why not?"

"He had a towel tied around his head; he had a swelling on one cheek that was as big as a pippin."

"Had he had the towel tied around his face all the time he was there, Mike?"

"Sure, ye had that same."

"I am talking about the other man. Don't you see that it was part of his disguise? Don't you see that the towel was kept tied around his face so that he could hide his features from you? Tell me, Mike, was the voice mine?"

"Well, mebbe not exactly; but I laid that to the toothache."

"Of course. But he had to talk, didn't he?"

"Sure it was mighty little talking he did, now that you mention it; and most of that was in growls and cuss words, too."

"Had you forgotten that I never swear? Did you ever hear me utter an oath since you have known me?"

"Well, mebbe not—till last night. But I thought the toothache would make a saint swear, so I did."

"A toothache wouldn't make me swear, Mike, and you know it, if you stop to think."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF A CLEAN SHAVE.

Mike McGrath was plainly disturbed by the questioning of his fellow watchman; and even Nick Carter, as he watched the man who was doing the questioning, began to ask himself if after all the plot to rob the bank was not deeper than he had dared to guess.

The detective recalled vaguely a circumstance not unlike this one which had happened in the city of New York many years before, where a plot not unlike this one had been hatched by a gang of robbers for the looting of a bank.

In that case, as in this case—if what Meeker was contending should be true—a watchman had been impersonated, had reported at the bank without being recognized, and a robbery had taken place which, while not like this one, resembled it sufficiently to make the two cases almost parallel in their conceptions.

Another thing occurred to the detective also.

Upon entering the president's room after returning from his interview with McGrath to find Meeker there awaiting his coming, he had been struck with an idea that the face of the elder watchman was not unfamiliar to him; but as they had talked together this idea had gradually become dispelled; but now it returned to him again with full force.

Still, he said no word of what was passing in his mind, but gave his entire attention to the questions that Meeker was asking, believing that doubtless something would develop from them which would afford him a clue as to how to work out the problem.

"Mike," Meeker continued after a short pause, "you and I have watched together in this bank for two years or more, haven't we?"

"We have that."

"Now cast your memory back over those two years and tell me if our relations have not been about the same each night during all that time?"

"They have."

"We have met each other in the same manner each night; we have gone the rounds almost like automatons; we have seated ourselves in this room for a chat before darkness came; we have smoked together; we have played at least one game of some kind each night. Is all that true?"

"Sure it is, Paul."

"Now let me ask you if everything was not different Saturday night and last night."

"Sure it was. But——"

"Wait. Was there one single thing that happened last night or the night before while you and that stranger were here together that was exactly like the things that have happened between us? Was there *one?*"

"Divil a one, Paul, and that's a fact."

"Don't you realize, then, that it was not I who was here, Mike?"

"Faith, I'm beginning to see it that way, and that's a fact. But I laid it all to the toothache."

"I never had a toothache in my life, Mike. If you will try to remember you will recall the fact that it wasn't a week ago that I told you that fact."

"Right you are, Paul."

Meeker turned again toward the detective.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "I have neglected to tell you that when I began to dress to come down here, just before the officer arrived at the house where I live, I could not find my clothes—the suit that I have worn almost a year. The entire suit, hat and shoes have disappeared. It stands to reason, according to my mind—or at least it is susceptible of proof—that I was drugged in some manner, and that after I had fallen under the influence of the drug I was bound and gagged. After that, somebody who looks sufficiently like me to represent me in part, dressed himself in my clothing, and then partly concealing the fact of the disguise by the bandage for toothache, came here and represented me. I don't ask you, sir, to believe me off-hand; but I do ask you at least to give me for the present the benefit of the doubt and to help me to establish the truth of what I assert."

Nick nodded and the watchman continued:

"I was not here. I was bound, gagged and helpless, besides being unconscious in my room. I live alone. I am known to sleep throughout the day because I am awake all night. I am known to be absent from my two rooms at night and all day Sunday. Nobody ever goes to my rooms to see me. Once a week, but that happens to be Wednesday, a woman goes there to clean up for me, but otherwise I am left severely alone. I cannot prove that I was there, bound and gagged all that time. I can only prove that I was found in that condition after I had succeeded in displacing the gag so that I could call for assistance. You might say that my confederates fixed me up in that manner after the robbery, but in return I would ask why should I go to all that trouble and risk returning here as a watchman if I were one of the participators in a robbery of more than a million dollars?"

Nick Carter replied at once and in a voice of calm assurance:

"Meeker, I believe you. I have more than half-believed you ever since you made your first statement to me about it. Wait, please. I have something more to say to you."

"Well, sir?"

"There is a suggestion of familiarity about your features which I cannot get out of my mind, but which I cannot quite place. It occurs to me now that the man you resemble and whom I cannot place in my memory, had a smoothly shaven face. I am going to ask you to do something to help me, and at the same time to help yourself."

"What is it, Mr. Carter, that you would have me do?"

"There is a barber shop in the basement around the corner. I want you to go there now—at once—and have your beard and mustache shaved off. When that is done, return here."

Meeker very plainly hesitated; a troubled expression came into his eyes; but presently he set his lips together firmly and rose to his feet.

"Very well, sir," he said. "I will do it. I believe I already know why you make the request. I think I know now whom I will resemble, after I have been shaved. But I will say nothing about it. I will leave it to your own way of doing it."

The detective nodded.

"Go ahead," he said. "Be as expeditious as possible; in the meantime we will await you here."

Without another word Meeker left his chair and walked unsteadily out of the room and from the building, and any one watching him would have been satisfied then and there that he was not counterfeiting a weakness he did not feel.

When he was gone the detective himself passed out to the front door where he had left Patsy, and he discovered, not greatly to his surprise, that the second assistant had disappeared.

Passing to the directors' room at the rear of the building, he discovered that Burns, the suspected messenger, had also gone, and he smiled to himself, not displeased.

"I am beginning to see through this maze now," he told himself as he returned to the room of the president of the bank; but he said nothing there about

the disappearance of the messenger. He knew that the man, possibly having been told that Nick Carter had left the building, had seized upon the opportunity to steal forth and disappear—as he doubtless believed; he could not know that one of the detective's assistants was on guard at the door, watching for the happening of just such an event.

It was exactly half an hour from the time of the departure of Meeker in search of a barber, when he returned; and the instant he entered the room where the detective was awaiting him, Nick Carter started to his feet with a half-uttered exclamation.

Meeker's lips parted as if he were about to speak, but Nick raised one hand and stopped him before he could utter a word.

"Wait, Meeker," he said peremptorily. "Go into the directors' room at the rear of the building. There is no one there. I will follow you. I wish to talk with you alone." And as soon as the man had gone he added, addressing Mr. Horlock: "I am beginning to see daylight in this case, sir. There is one element that puzzles me yet, and that is the connection of the messenger Burns."

"Ah, yes. But where is he? Isn't he in the directors' room, Carter?"

"No; he has done what I expected. He has slipped out of the door when he supposed he was not seen—but one of my assistants is on his trail, so he won't get away."

In the directors' room Nick closed the door carefully behind him, and then stood for a moment in silence regarding the now smoothly shaven Paul Meeker. Presently he asked, with abruptness:

"Is Meeker your right name?"

"It is my legal name, sir," was the low-toned reply.

"I did not ask you that question. Is it the name by which you have always been known?"

"No."

"I thought not. Do you know that there are several pictures, all of the same man, now in the rogue's gallery at headquarters, which might almost have been made of yourself? Pictures for which you might have been the original?"

"Yes."

"Is the man who did sit for those pictures any relation to you, Meeker?"

"Yes."

"Your brother, possibly?"

"My twin brother; yes, sir."

"Is that why you changed your name?"

"Yes. I applied to the County Court in Brooklyn years ago, and told the truth. Judge Moore was on the bench at that time. He acceded to my request. He had sent Jimmy up more than once, and he realized better than any one else could how necessary it was that I should change my name. Then I raised a beard and trimmed it as it was before I shaved."

"And your brother is James Atkerns, otherwise known as Jimmy Kerns, the burglar."*

"That is correct, Mr. Carter. Now you understand why I hesitated when you asked me to be shaved. I saw that you would place me at once, and aside from my natural hesitancy to be so recognized, there was the fact that I must give silent evidence against my brother."

The detective nodded and was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Meeker—I will continue to call you that and the public need not know that you ever had any other ——"

"Thank you, sir."

"Your brother Jimmy left prison about a year ago and declared that he had reformed. I had a very strange case for him in which one of his sons, a boy named Monmouth, was involved. But I believed that Jimmy had really reformed. Even now I find it hard to believe that he has backslid."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Carter, you can see for yourself now how easy it would have been for Jimmy to have passed himself off for me if he were so inclined."

"Yes."

"I, too, believed that he had reformed, for he has been to see me several times lately. But now I think that his reason for searching me out was that he with others was planning this very affair. You know him well enough to understand that there is nothing he cannot do in that line, once he sets his mind upon it."

"Yes. I know."

"I will say this, Mr. Carter: If it *was* Jimmy, I believe that he has been forced into the commission of this crime; forced into it by one of his former associates; forced into it because he was made to fear the consequences of a refusal to act with them. That is my idea."

*See No. 631 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Man in the Biograph."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CRIMINAL'S YOUNGER SON.

"It is about six months ago since that case in which Jimmy's son Monmouth was involved came under my notice," said the detective. "I was thoroughly convinced at the time of the entire reformation of your brother. Even the chief inspector at headquarters believed him, and offered him help at any time, if temptation should get in his way. I cannot understand his taking this step backward, unless as you say, he has been driven to it by a threat of some sort."

Meeker shook his head, but made no reply.

"Did you know about that case?" the detective asked him.

"No."

"Monmouth, the elder son, found employment with a biograph outfit. He acted the part of a pickpocket at work among the crowds that collect when the pictures for the biograph are being made. The other son, Jack, attended one of the ten-cent shows one afternoon and saw his brother picking pockets in the picture. Some Central Office men also saw it and finally Mont, as he is called, was arrested. It was not until the manager of the biograph outfit assured the authorities that it was all a part of the picture, and that the persons supposed to be robbed belonged among the actors, that his innocence was established."*

"I understand. I remember seeing something in the papers about it at the time. But I do not think that Monmouth's name was given; otherwise I would have recognized it."

"Meeker, do you know anything about this messenger who is called Burns?"

"No, sir."

"Have you ever known any of your brother's criminal associates?"

"No. Never."

"Then you can offer me no help in that quarter?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

"Humph! They could not have selected a better night for the robbery. The day that preceded it was perfect, too, for their plans. The storm made it possible for Jimmy to come here so bundled up that he could defy detection. It gave him a good excuse for having the toothache. He has had time to raise a beard, too, to trim it in imitation of the one you just shaved off. After that, all he required was your clothing and a little assurance—and he always had the last."

"Yes, sir."

"So, as it stands now, the case seems very plain; that is, it is plain enough as to who has represented you in this matter."

"I think there is no doubt of that, sir."

"We don't know yet *how* it was done; but we will find that out later on. Come with me to the president's room again now."

"Will it be necessary to reveal my identity, Mr. Carter?"

"No, Meeker; I have already assured you as to that point. Come."

To President Horlock a moment later the detective said:

"Mr. Horlock, Meeker has succeeded in assuring me that all he has said about this case is true and correct. Another person succeeded in passing himself off as Meeker; succeeded in deceiving McGrath and all who saw him. He had a confederate here in the bank who worked upon the vault lock at odd moments, so that he was enabled to make the clock run almost twice as fast as it ordinarily would. After the robbery it was the work of only a few moments to rearrange the lock so that it would run smoothly again and open at the right time. The man who worked inside the building was Burns, your messenger. The man who represented Meeker is an old offender and is known to me. Whether or not there are others implicated, I cannot now say, but I will know about it before long."

"Well, Carter, all that is very interesting. The point is——"

"The point is, are we going to recover the money. That is what you would say, isn't it?"

"Precisely."

"I think we are; at least we will get back so nearly all of it that the loss will be nothing to speak of."

"All right, Mr. Carter. You are a wonder; I will admit that."

"Don't begin to pay me compliments until you see some of the fruits of my labors, Mr. Horlock. I haven't caught the men yet, and I have not restored the money. I have only told you that I know the men and the game."

"You say you already know who it was who impersonated Meeker?"

"Yes; but I am not prepared to tell you about it just yet. Now tell me this: Have you taken measures to keep the fact of the robbery as quiet as possible?"

*See No. 631 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"I have sworn every person connected with the bank to secrecy. If the facts get out, it will not be from this institution."

"All right. I will take care of the other end of it. One thing more: You will retain Meeker and McGrath in their present places, will you not?"

"I see no reason why not; only I shall insist upon Meeker's changing his mode of living. He should not live alone as he does."

"I quite agree with you as to that."

When the detective took his hat and started to leave the bank the president asked him:

"When do you suppose I may expect to hear from you, Mr. Carter?"

"I cannot say as to that, Mr. Horlock," was the reply. "As soon as may be."

Nick Carter went straight to his own home, and as soon as he arrived there sent Joseph out with a written message which he was to deliver without delay.

It was addressed to John Atkerns, and was as follows:

"My Dear Jack: I want you to return here with the messenger who delivers this to you. I am sure that you will do so, remembering some favors that I have done for you in the past. I desire also that you will not mention the fact that you have received this request from me. It is very important that I should have an interview with you without delay."

It was an hour later when Joseph returned accompanied by the youth, and at the first question addressed to him after the greetings were over, the young man changed color.

"Jack," said the detective, "where is your father to-day?"

"I don't know, sir," was the instant reply.

"When did you last see him, Jack?"

"Not since breakfast-time, Saturday; more than two whole days ago."

"Yes. Does your mother know where he is?"

"I think not, although she has said nothing about it. But she has seemed worried of late; she seemed so even before he went away. I have had a feeling that all was not well. Please tell me, sir, has anything happened to——"

"Wait, lad. We will get to that part of it presently. Just now I wish you to answer my questions."

"Yes, sir."

"You are assured of my friendship for you, are you not?"

"Entirely so, Mr. Carter."

"And I am assured of your own integrity. Therefore, I think it well to be entirely frank with you. You have shown yourself such a brave chap in the past that I am inclined to the belief that you will always continue so. Do you remember, Jack, how hard it went with you at the time you feared that your brother had followed in the footsteps of your father, and had become a thief?"

"Indeed I do, sir."

"It was a great joy to all of us when we proved that he had done nothing wrong. It was a greater joy when we all believed that your father was entirely secure in his reformation, and were convinced that he would never commit another felony. But, Jack, I fear that he has been induced to go back to the old life—or has been forced into it again."

"Oh, sir, I *hope* it is not true."

"I fear that it is, Jack. One of the down-town banks has been robbed of a large sum. Everything points to your father as being one of the principals in that robbery. There is, indeed, no doubt of it in my mind."

"This is terrible, sir."

"He will have to go to prison again, Jack; there are no two ways about that. It will be a terrible blow to your mother, and so I want you to prepare her for it, my lad."

"But how, sir?"

"Go to her and tell her exactly what I shall tell you."

"It will be a hard thing to do, Mr. Carter!"

"Of course it will, Jack; but it is necessary. It is painful to amputate a leg to save a life, and this is not unlike such a circumstance. It is much better that your father should be returned to prison now than that he should go on with his crimes and have many more, instead of one more to answer for, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your mother should be considered. She would much rather your father were in prison for one crime than to have him a felon at large again. And there is another point, Jack."

"What is that, sir?"

"I believed so thoroughly in your father's reformation that I cannot now reconcile myself to the idea that he has gone deliberately back to the old life. I think he has been *driven* to it."

"How so?"

"That is a point wherein your mother can assist me, Jack."

"I don't think I understand you, sir."

"If your father has been forced back to the old life of crime, it has been accomplished by a threat. A threat could only be used against him with effect where it suggested the exposure of some greater crime in which your father was implicated, and which had never been found out. Shall I suggest to you what I have in mind, Jack?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we will suppose that sometime during the career of your father—sometime when one of his burglaries was being committed—a man was killed."

"A murder?" exclaimed Jack, with horror.

"We will call it that—yes. Suppose one of his old pals knew about it, and having planned this robbery that has just taken place, went to your father and threatened him if he did not assist in carrying it off to expose the greater crime and give him up to the law? I believe that your father, rather than visit the terror of that greater crime upon your mother, would consent to assist at another burglary; would prefer to be sent away again for another burglary, rather than have her suppose him guilty of taking a life. That is the way I look at it."

"But how, in that case, can my mother help you, Mr. Carter?"

"She will perhaps know something about your father's former associates. She may even have guessed at this other crime with which he has been threatened. At all events, I want you to go home to your mother now and to tell her all. Tell her everything and then make her understand how necessary it is that she should receive me and talk the matter over with me carefully. Will you do that, Jack?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you go home now and do it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. I will follow you there in an hour."

CHAPTER IX.

THE INFLUENCE OF A THREAT.

Before Nick Carter left the house to follow in the footsteps of Jack Atkerns he called Joseph to him and told him to keep a sharp watch for news from Patsy, and if a message should arrive from the second assistant to lose no time in transmitting it to him at once. Nick expected something to develop from the shadowing of the man called Burns.

He found Mrs. Kerns—or, as she was known where she lived, Mrs. Atkerns—awaiting him when he arrived at the house. She was calm and self-contained, although it was plainly to be seen that she had been weeping since her interview with her son.

"This is terrible news that has been brought to me, Mr. Carter," she told him, "but it is only fair for me to admit that it was not entirely unexpected. I have been in daily fear of something of the kind for the last two months or more."

"Please tell me why you have feared it, madam," replied the detective.

"Oh, because I know my husband so well. I can almost read his thoughts. I have known that something was amiss with him."

"How have you known it? Why have you suspected it?"

"He has been out at night several times; he has had appointments with men whom he did not tell me about. I was convinced that they were among his old associates."

"Did you say anything to him about your suspicions?"

"Yes. Several times."

"With what result?"

"He merely denied it all. He laughed at me for my fears; but all the while I realized that I had reason for them, notwithstanding the fact that I tried to make myself believe otherwise."

"How long a time has that sort of thing been going on, madam?"

"Two or three months; three, nearer than two."

"That was when you first noticed the change in him?"

"Yes."

"How were you first cognizant of any change?"

"He became moody and morose. He lost his cheerfulness. I could see that something was troubling him and I asked him about it."

"He denied it?"

"Yes."

"Did he offer any explanation for his altered condition of mind?"

"No; that is, not until I suggested one."

"Ah; you suggested a reason? What was it?"

"That, sir, is something about which I have no right to tell you."

"On the contrary it is the very thing you should tell me about. Listen, Mrs. Atkerns, I believe that upon that very thing to which you now refer, hangs the solution of all this difficulty. If Jimmy has been

implicated in this last bank robbery, and I have now no doubt that he was, he must, of course, be returned to prison. But I have no doubt that he will be quite willing to go there. Now, in order to understand how he has been induced to break his vow of reformation, we must look into his past rather deeply. I have always believed that he was sincere in his effort to lead a better life, and, therefore, he could only have been forced to a renewal of his crimes, by *threats*."

The woman caught her breath, and the detective continued:

"Somewhere in Jimmy's past there has been a greater crime than any he has been openly charged with; possibly a murder——"

"You have guessed it," the woman interrupted him calmly. "I have decided that I will tell you about it."

"That is best, believe me."

"There *was* a murder, Mr. Carter, but Jimmy did not commit it. It was more than ten years ago. He and another man were committing a burglary. They had entered a house together. A third man was on watch outside the house. Before they had a chance to take any of the property from the house, they were surprised by the owner, who came upon them suddenly. He grappled with the man who was with Jimmy, and the man shot him dead. My husband was so horror-stricken that he stood there dazed until the other two had made their escape; then he also fled. My husband was not even armed at the time, and had not thought that such a crime would be committed."

"Well? Go on, please."

"He made his escape from the house. No trace of the men who had entered it was ever discovered, but the fact that he was there when the crime was committed has always hung like a cloud over Jimmy's life. It was why he always worked alone after that; it had a great deal to do with his determination to reform."

"Did you ever hear the name of the man who committed the deed?" asked the detective.

"Yes; that is, the name by which he was known at the time."

"What was it."

"Boyne. He was called 'Black Boyne, because of his dark complexion, black eyes and hair." Nick nodded his head, recalling at the moment the sharp black eyes of the bank messenger called Burns.

"Has Jimmy frequently discussed that affair with you, madam?" he asked.

"He used to do so. It had not been mentioned between us for a long time until I suggested it as a reason for his recent change of manner."

"But you did suggest it to him?"

"Yes; and he admitted that it was troubling him. He said he couldn't get it off his mind, and when I asked him what had brought it back to him he replied that he had seen the man called Boyne on the street; but he denied that he had talked with Boyne."

"Nevertheless," said the detective, with conviction, "he had done so."

"Yes. I believe that, also."

"I think I see the whole plot now. I will outline it to you in order to get it perfectly straight in my own mind."

"Very well, sir."

"First let me ask you if you know about the twin brother of your husband who lives under the name of Meeker?"

"Yes, sir."

"Paul Meeker is a watchman at the bank that was robbed. Boyne must have found out that fact, and discovered the strong resemblance between them. Boyne has planned out his robbery to the smallest detail, and then with his plans perfected, has sought your husband and asked him to take part in the burglary. When Jimmy refused, as no doubt he did do at first, Boyne has threatened to accuse him of the murder of that man you told me about, and doubtless, has had it already arranged with the other burglar—the one who watched outside that night—to swear that Jimmy did it. You realize, do you not? that the two of them could easily swear Jimmy's life away, escaping themselves with slight punishment, for turning State's evidence? And immunity for them would be all the more readily granted because so long a time has elapsed since the commission of the crime."

"I understand, sir."

"So Boyne has told Jimmy that unless he agreed to assist them in this robbery; unless he consented to impersonate his own brother, and do what was demanded of him, they would charge him with the murder of that other man ten years ago."

"Yes, sir. I see it all now."

"That is the manner in which he has been induced to undertake this last robbery; that is how he has been forced back into crime. Now, Mrs. Atkerns, we must find Jimmy."

The woman nodded her head, but was silent.

"We must find Jimmy and those other two men, for, doubtless, they were both mixed up in this affair; and I will not only bring them to book for this robbery, but I will bring that other crime home to them so that Jimmy will be freed from the stigma of that."

"Oh, sir, if I thought you could do that I would assist you with every breath in my body."

"I have no doubt of it, madam."

"And so would Jimmy. He would not care about the years he would have to serve for this bank robbery if only he could rid himself of that other charge. And he did not commit *that* crime. I know that."

"Could you help me to find Jimmy, do you think?" asked Nick.

"I don't know, sir. Heretofore, when he has committed crimes, he has always sooner or later communicated with me. But I doubt if he will do so this time."

"Why?"

"He will be so ashamed."

"If he should communicate with you, will you let me know about it, madam?"

The woman was silent for a long time; but at last she said:

"I don't know, sir, what I ought to do. It would seem like a betrayal of my husband, and he trusts me. I would not like to do what you ask. I know that it should be done; I realize that I have no right to stand between him and the law when he has committed a felony; but there is the fact that he has always trusted me, and that I have never betrayed him. I do wish that you would not ask it of me."

"I understand you, madam. I will not ask it. If you hear from Jimmy, keep the fact to yourself. I will go ahead on the case as if you did not exist. I will not ask such a sacrifice of you."

"Oh, sir, how can I thank you?"

"Never mind that. You have told me sufficient so that possibly I can get on the track of Boyne. I know him by another name. There should be a picture of him in the gallery."

"What is the other name by which you know him, Mr. Carter?"

"Burns. He has been a messenger at the——"

"Wait, Mr. Carter. One night about a week ago, when my husband came home very late, I asked him where he had been and with whom he had spent the evening. He replied that he had been with a man named Burns. I asked him then if Burns was one of his old associates, and he replied evasively by saying that he had never been intimate with a man by that name."

"Oh, there is no doubt in my mind that Burns and Boyne are one and the same," replied the detective smilingly. "I suppose you have never seen the man?"

"No."

"Is there anything more that you can tell me about Boyne, as Boyne?"

"I think not."

"Do you know what became of him after that man was killed?"

"I heard my husband say that he had left the country; that is all."

"Do you know where he was supposed to have gone?"

"No, sir. All that I know is that he is a Frenchman by birth but had lived in London all his life, and that he was new to this country at the time of that murder. Also, I have heard my husband say about him, at that time, that he was the most expert tool-maker he had ever known."

"Ah," said the detective. "That is a good point. It bears out another theory of mine."

"I think Jimmy said once that Boyne had been a watchmaker in his youth, but I am not sure as to that."

"Nevertheless, I think there is no doubt of its truth, madam. Thank you. I won't harass you any longer, now. Try and keep up good heart, and believe that I will do all that can be done to spare you unnecessary pain."

"Thank you, sir. I realize that, Mr. Carter."

And so the interview closed.

CHAPTER X.

AN OLD WAR-HORSE AT WORK.

Nick Carter went from the home of Mrs. Atkerns straight to the headquarters of police where he spent a long time in going over the pictures in the rogue's gallery; but, although he made a thorough search he could not find there a single face which suggested the original of the bank messenger.

Once he stopped long enough in his search to telephone to his own house, but nothing had been heard from Patsy, and so he continued his labor.

When he left the white building in Mulberry Street he took a Broadway car up-town, and got down from it at Madison Square; then, as he was about to cross the park toward his home he came face to face with one of the former great men of New York; a man for whom Nick Carter had always felt the liveliest admiration and esteem.

The man was Thomas Byrnes, former head of the detective bureau of New York, and the first man who ever bore the title of Chief of Police in the City of New York.

Before he received that title, the heads of the department had been called superintendents; now they are known as commissioners. Byrnes was the first chief.

"Chief," exclaimed the detective, "I am very glad to see you!"

"And I am just as glad to see you, Nick," returned the other, as they shook hands together cordially. "You are still at the old game, I suppose, Nick? But I know that without asking."

"Yes; still at the old game. Do you not sometimes wish that you were back at it, chief?" asked Nick, smiling.

"Oh, yes; there are times when I wish it—and yet I am glad to be out of it, too. It is only when I see the men doing wrong on one case or another that I have the desire to be back in Mulberry Street to tell them what to do. I'd like to see you as commissioner of the police, Nick."

"I? Not on your life. I wouldn't take it if it were offered; and it isn't likely to be offered me. By the way, chief, there is a question I would like to ask you."

"Is there? Well, fire away. What is it?"

"Did you ever happen to know anything about an English crook—of French birth—I think—a black-eyed, black-haired, good-looking fellow, expert tool-maker, formerly a watchmaker, who sometimes called himself Boyne, and was known among his pals as 'Black' Boyne?"

A quizzical smile appeared on the face of the great Byrnes as he replied slowly:

"Is it a case of your own, Nick?"

"Yes."

"Well, your description sounds very much like a chap I once knew about who was known as 'Black'

Burgoyne. He was a Frenchman; but he was never arrested in this country. The chief over in Paris sent me his description once, I remember, but the fellow didn't get here. He was pinched on the other side, just as he was getting aboard of a ship to come here. But I remember the circumstance very well indeed. I never saw the man, however. I don't think he ever came to this country during my time in office."

"It is rather remarkable that you recall the circumstance, chief."

"Not at all, Nick. I always made it a point to remember such things. But say, if you are particularly interested in the fellow, and care to get into my car with me—it is standing around the corner in Twenty-fifth Street—I'll take you to my house. It won't take me a minute to put my hands upon the memoranda concerning him. Will you come?"

"You bet I will!"

The two chatted upon other subjects during the ride to the great chief's home, which is on the West side, among the Seventies—when they arrived there the former chief presently brought a book to Nick which he spread open upon the detective's knee, and pointed to a closely written paragraph.

"Read that," he said. "Possibly it will help you out. Read it aloud if you don't mind. I would like to refresh my own memory about it."

And so Nick Carter read aloud as follows, from the book that Thomas Byrnes showed him:

"'Burgoyne, Edouard, alias Black Burgoyne, alias Black Boyne, alias Beady Ned, alias Burns, alias Edwards. Five feet ten; one hundred and sixty-eight pounds; muscular, well-built, active, alert, quick as a cat, handsome, white hands, scar on back of right hand between second and third knuckle-joints, black hair, eyes same, small and beady but very bright and piercing, straight nose, eyebrows meet and are heavy, long eyelashes, straight, cruel mouth, very white teeth, two lower back teeth missing on left side jaw, one same on right side upper jaw; is well educated, speaks several languages fluently; watchmaker by trade; tool-maker, also; wonderfully expert at picking locks; speaks abruptly and quickly, in soft voice, however. *Wanted* for robbing a bank in Paris by changing mechanism of the lock——' That is about all I care to know," exclaimed the detective. "He is the man, all right."

"Read on," said the former chief.

"'Has perhaps never been in America, but expected now. Mode of life is to hire furnished apartment in swell locality and pose as moneyed man. *Method of work:* Usually seeks employment in concern he wishes to rob. Can pass himself off for anything from janitor to manager of almost any institution. Sometimes calls himself a count, or a marquis. Is no doubt of good family.'"

"Is that all?" asked Byrnes.

"Yes," replied the detective.

"And is he the man you want?"

"There isn't a doubt of it, sir."

"Well," remarked the former chief, laughing, "those books of mine which I kept so carefully for so many years are something like the venom of the rattler; they outlast the life of the reptile. Do you think that dossier, as the Frenchmen call it, will help you, Nick?"

"I am sure of it."

"Can I, personally, be of any assistance to you?"

"Certainly; if you can suggest to me where to look for the fellow."

"Tell me first what he has done."

"Do you remember the murder of a man about ten years ago, who was killed by burglars—it wasn't long after you left the department, I think—in his own home and no trace of the men that did it was ever found? The man's name was——"

"John Cummings, wasn't it? He lived in Eighty-first Street, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I remember it."

"Well, Boyne did that; just now he has carried out a robbery which is not unlike the one mentioned here as his forte," and the detective then described in detail the robbery at the Pontiac National Bank, relating everything just as we have rehearsed it here to the reader. "And now," he said in conclusion, "Boyne has forced old Jimmy Kerns back into the game after he had reformed——"

"Was it a real reformation, Nick?"

"Without a doubt."

"Jimmy has got a nice wife and family, I have heard."

"He has that;" and here Nick described the case of the biograph, and ended by relating the interview he had had with Jimmy's wife.

The former chief listened to it all, almost without comment; but at the close, he said:

"And now you want to know where to look for Boyne, eh?"

"Yes."

The old chief shook his head, then nodded; and he said:

"I think I should lose no time in finding him, Nick. He will light out of this country as soon as he dares undertake it. He will go to some other part of the world to enjoy his loot. But before he goes he will put old Jimmy out of the way."

"Do you think so?"

"I am almost sure of it."

"Patsy is on his track, somewhere. It puzzles me, though, that Patsy has sent in no report of what has happened."

"The likelihood is that Boyne has discovered that he was followed. He may have gotten Patsy into a bad way by this time. I don't think I would wait for Patsy to show up."

"I did not intend to do that, chief."

"The reference there"—the former chief pointed toward the open book—"about his mode of life, is important."

"Yes?"

"You must take into consideration the fact that he considers himself in a new country where little or nothing is known about him. He once was aware that I knew about him, but I have been out of the game so long that he does not consider it important. See?"

"Yes."

"Hence I would suppose that naturally he would take to the methods he formerly employed at the time I received that information about him. I believe, if it were my own case, that I would look for him in one of the first-class apartment-houses, or in one of the first-class hotels."

"Where would you begin, chief?"

"At the best, and work downward. It is the easiest and often the quickest."

"I agree with you as to that."

"Hence I think I would try the Mammoth, first."

"Isn't there one thing about him that we are neglecting, chief?" asked Nick.

"I don't know. What is it?"

"We must remember that for two months or more he has been employed as a messenger at the bank he has just robbed. He would not have lived at a first-class hotel during that time."

"Certainly not. Neither would he have gone to that place after he left the bank to-day. But that only makes me the more certain that he will now be found—if he is found at all—in one of the first-class places. You see he would all this time have been preparing an alibi. From ten to three each day, a bank messenger; from some time in the afternoon or evening until he retired, a count, or a marquis, or a capitalist, living in fine shape and doubtless getting himself regarded as an eccentric of some sort. Don't you think so?"

"I certainly do, chief."

"Stay and take dinner with me; it will be ready in a moment; then I'll drive you around to the Mammoth in my car. If we don't get results there, we will go elsewhere."

"Do you mean that you will assist me?" asked the detective, well pleased by the suggestion.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, it is a great pleasure to have you do so, chief. I have had a good many assistants on various cases, but I never expected to number you among them."

"It won't be the first time we have worked together on a case, Nick. I had something to do with your training, too; have you forgotten that?"

"No, indeed."

"Your father and I often consulted together about you, boy—for you are still a boy to me, Nick. I have always been proud of you. You have borne out my early prophesies concerning you—and that is a heap more than I can say of most of the youngsters I knew. Ah! Now for our dinner, and after that I'll go with you. Honestly, it gives me a lot of pleasure, Nick. I'll bet you that we get Black Burgoyne before morning. Take it?"

"No. I begin to think so myself."

"We're certain to, Nick."

"I'm sure I hope so, chief."

CHAPTER XI.

PATSY MAKES A REPORT.

Nick Carter left the former chief of police waiting outside in the automobile while he went to the hotel desk to make the necessary inquiries.

It must be borne in mind that he could not have any direct method for doing this, inasmuch as it was only an idea of his and the former chief's that Black Boyne might have put up at this first-class establishment.

But Nick Carter was on more or less familiar terms with the manager of the hotel, and was fortunate enough to meet him face to face in the corridor directly in front of the office desk; and he called him aside, leading the way into a small anteroom that was immediately at hand.

Addressing the manager by name, he said:

"I am in search of a man who may be stopping here and who may not have been at this hotel at all. I have no means of knowing under what name he would register unless he may have pursued a former method of his, that of calling himself a count or marquis; but I can describe him to you so that, unless he is traveling under a disguise as well as an assumed name, you will have no difficulty in placing him if you have seen him."

The manager laughed.

"Your description so far is rather obscure, Mr. Carter," he said. "However, I will do the best I can to assist you."

The detective then repeated the description almost word for word as he had read it in the book shown him by the former chief of police, Byrnes.

The manager listened attentively to the end and then with the laconic remark: "Please wait here," turned abruptly and walked behind the office desk.

He was gone several minutes when he returned and announced with emphasis:

"The man to whom you refer, Mr. Carter, has kept rooms during the last three months, but he gave them up late yesterday afternoon and left no address behind him."

"Are you quite sure that he has gone?" asked Nick.

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt of that."

"Then possibly we can find the driver who took him away from the hotel."

"I have already put that question to the carriage-clerk," replied the manager. "He will report to us in a moment."

The carriage-clerk appeared within a few moments and gave the information that the gentleman who had been known at the hotel as Count Burgoyne had been

taken to the Grand Central Station in time for the Twentieth Century Limited; and that was all the information that the detective was able to glean at the Hotel Mammoth.

He returned presently to the automobile waiting outside and informed his friend of what had happened, and, while the latter in perplexity gnawed at the ends of his heavy mustache, Nick reentered the hotel and by telephone communicated with Joseph in the hope that there would be some information from Patsy.

There was none, however, and he returned again to the car.

"I don't see how we are to proceed further in this line, chief," he said. "Unless we make the rounds of all the first-class hotels in this locality, and it seems to me hardly a logical thing to do."

"No," admitted the former chief, "I agree with you there, Nick."

"Besides," continued the detective, "it is not unlikely that he may really have taken a train out of the Grand Central Station, although I doubt very much if it would have been the Twentieth Century Limited. It is my opinion that if he did leave the city by train, he went to Canada, probably to Montreal, from which place he would take one of the steamers for the other side."

The former chief nodded, and then, with a light laugh, remarked:

"Well, Nick, I guess I will leave you to finish the case alone. I had anticipated something interesting and possibly exciting in case we should find the man here at this hotel. I don't think at the present moment that I have any further suggestions to make, and so, unless you have use for the car, I will leave you."

Nick remained standing at the curb after the former chief's automobile was driven away. He was pondering over that dossier of the former chief's that he had read over so carefully; and he was presently called out of his abstraction by feeling a hand placed lightly upon his arm.

Turning he beheld the carriage-clerk of the hotel, and the latter said to him:

"Mr. Carter, the manager has just been explaining to me who you are, and since he did so I have found the driver who took Count Burgoyne to the Grand Central Station yesterday. The driver says he is sure that he saw the man engage a taxicab soon after he arrived at the station, and, as the chauffeur of the taxicab is known to him, he thinks he can find him at the station if you care to drive there with him."

We need not follow in detail the occurrences of the next hour during which time Nick Carter interviewed not one, but three different taxicab chauffeurs. We need only deal with the result which was: that shortly after ten o'clock that night he was deposited in front of one of the enormous apartment-houses of the upper west side of the city, to which place he had finally succeeded in tracing the movements of Burgoyne, alias Boyne. But here again another disappointment awaited him.

It appeared that the man had actually engaged an apartment in the house, but had merely gone there on this occasion to relinquish it and to take away from it certain belongings which he had already left there.

From that point there was absolutely no trace of the man, and, feeling that it was too late at night to continue his searches further with any hope of immediate success, the detective had himself driven to his own home, where as yet there was no news of Patsy on his quest.

When Nick, seated in his study, however, was going over in his mind the incidents of the day, he realized that it was not by any means strange that Patsy had sent in no word; for, although it seemed to the detective as though a long time had elapsed since Patsy left the front door of the Pontiac National Bank on the trail of the messenger Burns, in reality it was little more than ten hours since that event happened.

It is not always possible for a detective, who is acting the part of a shadow, to send in messages or reports to his superior officer.

If the person followed happens to be unusually active, or if he darts about from place to place as Black Boyne had done, the shadower finds very little opportunity for relaxation from his duties, and it is dangerous on such occasions to take sufficient time even for the use of a telephone or for the writing of a note or for the sending of a message in any form, because, while it is being done, the shadowed man is more than likely to make good his escape.

Nick Carter had been seated in his own room rather more than an hour when he heard Patsy's quick step upon the stairs, and he started to his feet to admit the second assistant to the study, greatly pleased that he had arrived, and not doubting that he had brought important information.

Patsy, as we are aware, was, when he chose to be so, one of the most expert shadows in the business, and it was very rarely indeed that he lost a trail once he was well established in pursuit of it.

There was a grin of satisfaction on his face when he entered the study and flung himself into one of the chairs, exclaiming as he did so:

"Gee, but I'm tired, chief! That fellow has kept me humping ever since we left the bank. He hasn't done a thing but travel from one end of the town to another, changing cabs for cars and cars for cabs and act for all the world as if the devil himself was after him."

"But you didn't lose him, did you?" asked the detective.

"Not on your life I didn't, chief. I thought two or three times that I had done so, but each time I picked him up again."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"I sure do."

"Where is he?"

"At the Hotel Mammoth."

"What!" exclaimed the detective incredulously.

"He's at the Hotel Mammoth, chief; that's what I said."

"Then he has doubled on his trail," said the detective, laughing. "He has been living there until yesterday under the name of Count Burgoyne."

"I don't know anything about that," replied Patsy. "What I do know is that he is registered there at this moment under the name of Edwards, and he has taken two rooms on the top floor—two of the most inexpensive rooms he could get."

"You wouldn't have left him, Patsy, unless you were quite sure that he had fixed himself for the night."

"Oh, I'm pretty positive about that."

"Then, come!" exclaimed Nick, starting to his feet. "I don't propose to give that man another chance to get away. You fill out one of those blank warrants over there while I am getting into my coat and hat."

Three minutes later the detective and his second assistant left the house together and walked rapidly away toward the Hotel Mammoth, which was located only a few blocks distant.

Patsy was so certain of what they would find there that he strode along with a jaunty air of self-satisfaction; Nick, however, was troubled by misgivings.

Had either of them known what they really would find their pace would have been increased to a run, and they would not have lost a second of time in arriving in that room on the top floor where they expected to find their prey.

CHAPTER XII.

A CRIMINAL AT BAY.

When the two entered the Hotel Mammoth together, the time was shortly after eleven o'clock, approximately three hours since Nick had visited the same place in company with former chief of police, Thomas Byrnes.

As on the former occasion the detective encountered the manager in the corridor, and, drawing him aside for a moment, related what Patsy had told him regarding the return to the hotel of the pseudo Count Burgoyne under the name of Edwards.

"I want to go directly to those rooms he has taken," said Nick, "and I would like you to call the hotel detective to accompany me, and tell him to provide himself with a pass-key."

This request on the part of Nick Carter was soon carried out, and so interested had the manager become that he ascended with them in the elevator to the top floor of the famous building and himself led the way along the corridors until they presently paused before the door of the room they sought.

The hotel detective took a step forward, pass-key in hand, and was about to make use of it when Nick reached out a detaining hand and at the same time rapped loudly and peremptorily upon the panels of the door.

There was no immediate answer and Nick rapped again; and then, still receiving no response to the summons, he nodded to the hotel detective to make use of the pass-key.

As he stepped back to afford an opportunity for this, and while his own eyes as well as Patsy's and the manager's were fixed upon the door ready to enter it the instant it should be thrown ajar—while their gaze as well as their attention was concentrated upon the opening of this particular door, Nick Carter was startled by a sudden click at the next door to it along the corridor and he turned abruptly just in time to see a figure dart into the hallway, and, with a run, disappear into one of the side corridors of the building.

Instantly the detective realized that the door which had opened to permit the exit of this person without doubt communicated with the second of the two rooms that Boyne had engaged under the name of Edwards, and, without a word, since there was no time to make use of one, he started in hot pursuit of the fugitive.

The door where they had been standing was the second one from the end of the corridor where it turned to run along the other side of the building, and before Patsy and the others realized that Nick Carter had left them he was speeding along it in pursuit of the man who was trying so hard to escape from them.

Nick felt that there could be no doubt that the man was Boyne; that he had heard them rapping at his door, and already fearful that he had been successfully trailed, had lost no time in making his escape by means of the second exit from the two rooms he had engaged.

Nick Carter is a sprinter as we well know; but so was the other man. He ran like a scared rabbit through that corridor along the west side of the building and turned into the one at the south side of it while the detective was still at least fifty feet behind him; and when Nick reached that turn the fellow had disappeared.

Nick came to an instant pause where the corridors turned, for he know that there was but one way by which Boyne could have eluded him, and that was to have entered another room that was near at hand.

It is rather a delicate matter for a man to pass from room to room along the corridor of a great hotel at that hour of the night, rapping upon each door to demand if a stranger is there. No one knows by whom the rooms may be occupied or how the occupants will accept such a startling interruption.

Yet there was no other means for the detective to employ.

It is true that the manager and the hotel detective were both on the same floor, but to go in search of them would mean to leave the way of escape for this criminal unguarded and to permit him the very opportunity he was seeking.

But suddenly the detective recalled the number of the suite of rooms that had been occupied by pseudo Count Burgoyne, and he remembered that they were located on this particular floor.

Like a flash it occurred to him that doubtless Boyne, in his character as the count, had carried away with him a key to that suite and had now found it an available means of escaping from his pursuers.

The detective glanced at the number on the door closest to him, and then moved swiftly along to the third one beyond, which was the number he sought.

There he paused for an instant, and, taking from his pocket his own pick-lock, an instrument quite as efficacious as any pass-key the hotel detective carried, he applied it with great care and caution to the lock, so that not even the grating noise of its contact could be heard; and, having inserted it properly, he gave a sharp, quick turn, thus throwing back the bolt of the lock and the next instant he had leaped inside the room, reaching around behind the door-jamb as he did so, and snapping on the electric lights.

Boyne—or Burns as we have known him—and looking not unlike the criminal bank messenger, was standing exactly in the center of the suddenly illuminated room; and when Nick Carter snapped the electric switch and so flooded the room with light, he leaped forward toward the detective, uttering a snarl of rage as he did so, and at the same time discharging a pistol at Nick Carter while the muzzle of it was not six feet distant from him.

But the act was sudden, the moment was an exciting one, and the aim was, therefore, uncertain.

Where the bullet went Nick Carter did not know, and he did not stop to inquire.

Upon the instant the two men were grappling together, and as they struggled across the room, overturning a table and some chairs as they did so, Nick succeeded in securing his favorite ju-jutsu hold with the result that messenger Burns, the man of many aliases, was flung like a cartwheel to the other side of the apartment where, colliding against the wall, he sank to the floor with a groan and quite insensible.

Still the detective wasted no time.

Without stopping to restore the table and chairs to upright positions, he seized the former bank messenger in his arms, lifted him from the floor, and passed out upon the corridor, snapping off the electric switch as he did so, and closing the door after him as he went.

It required only a moment for him to reach the turn into the north corridor upon which the rooms taken by Boyne, under the name of Edwards, were located, and, as he approached them presently, he saw that they were standing open and were brilliantly lighted.

Just as he entered at the doorway which he had left so suddenly in pursuit of the criminal, he was confronted by the manager of the hotel, who was coming out in search of him, and just beyond he saw a sight which made him cast from him the burden he carried and start forward precipitately.

Lying upon the floor in the middle of the room was poor old Jimmy Kerns, and it needed but a glance from Nick Carter to assure the detective that the old criminal, who had served so many years in prison and who had at last tried so hard to reform, was now well started upon a journey from which there is no return.

The old man was conscious yet, however, and he recognized Nick Carter the moment the detective knelt beside him.

"Who did it, Jimmy? If you've got strength enough to tell me, tell me now."

"It was Boyne, Mr. Carter; Black Boyne," was the husky voiced reply. "He stabbed me. He did it just when you rapped at the door. I think he had intended to do it all the time. I believe that is what he had me come here to this hotel for."

Nick Carter started backward and raised the insensible form of Boyne from the floor.

"Is this the man who did it, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"An old-time pal of yours, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

"Is he also the man who murdered John Cummings of which crime they charged you?"

"He is. I swear to it with my dying breath."

Nick smiled grimly as he replied with low emphasis:

"Then, Jimmy, I think you may be at ease in your last moments. The charge of having murdered John Cummings will no longer lie against you, and as for this last crime you have helped to commit, we all know that you were forced into it against your will."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter," said the ex-convict; and he closed his eyes with a sigh of relief.

* * * * * * *

It should be stated here that Jimmy Kerns, as he was known on the criminal records, lived almost twenty-four hours after that and was given the opportunity to make his peace with his family and Heaven.

Concerning the manipulation of the time-lock at the bank, it only needs to be told now that the methods employed by the expert under the direction of Nick Carter, when he was called to the bank to investigate the robbery, were precisely those used by Black Boyne in obtaining the cash.

We already know by deduction just how the details of the robbery were carried out; how Kerns was induced to impersonate his brother, and how the signals were passed by him from the window of the president's room to the confederates on the street.

Whether or not another person was implicated in the commission of this robbery did not develop, but at all events the man who had played the part of a bank messenger under the name of Burns had succeeded in getting himself so thoroughly into the meshes of the law that there was little hope of his escape.

With the added information that the fourteen hundred and odd thousand dollars, taken from the bank vaults, was recovered, we can bring this story to a close.

THE END.

The next number, 633, will contain "The Moving-picture Mystery; or, Nick Carter's Blindest Trail."

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JOE'S NUGGET.

By ARTHUR L. MESERVE.

I had been about three months at Tear-shirt Camp when the thing happened which I am going to tell you of.

We had all of us only middling luck. None of the party had made a big strike in the way of finding nuggets. Still, we had nothing to complain of. We were making fair wages, and that in the long run is better than making a big haul at one time, and then laying off and running through the whole of it in less than a month's time, as I have known plenty of fellows to do.

One day the camp was all astir like a hive of bees which somebody had thrown a rock into. One of our chaps, a fellow by the name of Joe Garland, had made a ten-strike. He had hit upon the biggest nugget of gold that had ever been found in the region of Tear-shirt. It was a good one, worth a couple of thousand at least, and the boys all gathered about it with greedy eyes. They envied Joe his good luck; still they were all glad that he had got it. A prouder fellow than he was you never saw. He hugged the chunk and petted it, and it did seem that he would never tire of feasting his eyes upon it.

After the first excitement was over Joe was left to his treasure, and the boys turned to digging again, each one hoping that he might soon be as fortunate as Joe had been.

Joe had half a mind to set off for 'Frisco with his treasure at once. The express only ran once a week, and it lacked three days of the time of going again. He was afraid that in some way he might lose the nugget before it was got to a place of safety. Still, I don't think that there was a person in the camp that he was suspicious of. It would have been hard to have picked out a fellow who was not called all right.

Joe carried his nugget to the camp, but he would not stow it away with the rest of the treasure. He would hide it for himself. If the rest was stolen while he was away at work he was going to save his.

Two or three times a day Joe would leave his work and go and see that the nugget was safe. We used to tease him about it, and tell him he was losing flesh at the rate of ten pounds a day, and that if the treasure was not sent away soon there would be nothing left of him but skin and bones.

The second day after the finding of the treasure, about the middle of the forenoon, Joe made one of these visits to the camp. He was gone but a little time, and when he came back a more frightened and wobegone-looking countenance than his you never saw in your life.

"What is it?" we all cried, as he came dashing in among us.

"It's gone!" was all the poor fellow could manage to say.

"What is gone?" we repeated, though on the mind of each flashed the thought of the treasure.

"The nugget," he gasped.

We dropped spade and pick and started for the camp. All of us were interested. If the nugget was stolen, most likely all the dust we had gathered had gone with it.

We piled into the camp and went for the spot where the general treasure was kept. Each drew a breath of relief when we found that it had not been tampered with. The robber, whoever he was, had contented himself with Joe's nugget.

After we had satisfied ourselves with a look in the place where Joe kept it, and thus convinced ourselves that it was really gone, we all turned to, to try and find a clue to the robber.

But, try as we would, not the slightest clue could we find. Not a track could we discover about the camp, except those which we felt sure our own feet had made.

The fellow who done the cooking was the only one who had been about the camp since we had left in the morning, and nobody, much less Joe, suspected him, for he was Joe's brother.

It had been his custom to do up the work in the morning, and spend the rest of the forenoon with us until it was time for dinner.

He had not been at the diggings more than an hour before Joe had made the discovery of his loss, so that the robbery could have but just taken place.

All that day we spent in searching around but getting no clue. Whoever the robber was he had covered his trail too well for us.

Night obliged us to give over the search, and the lost nugget was the last thing in our thoughts, as one after another we dropped off to sleep.

I had been asleep some time when some one gave me a nudge in my side, which completely woke me. I started up, and dimly in the darkness I saw Joe's brother beside me.

"What do you want?" I said, a trifle annoyed, for I didn't relish the punch I had got.

"Hush!" he said, "Joe has just got up and gone out; and if he wasn't asleep when he went then I miss my guess. He used to do such things when he was a boy. Let us follow him."

I sprang to my feet and we went softly out. A sudden thought flashed to my mind, but I said nothing. It might be that the nugget would be found.

It was bright starlight outside, and we saw Joe moving away toward a clump of oaks which stood about forty rods off. We followed after him as fast as we could and got to the trees almost as soon as he did. At the foot of one he stopped and bent down, and pretty soon we saw him draw something forth. For a while he seemed to be fondling it; then he put it carefully back, and, turning round, he went by us toward the camp. He moved like one who had his eyes shut, and both of us would have taken our oath that he was fast asleep.

"The nugget is found," said I, in a whisper, and then we hurried to the tree. Its trunk was hollow, and thrusting in my hand I drew out the lost treasure.

We carried it back to the camp. When we got there no one was stirring. Joe was lying on his back, fast asleep,

and all the rest were snoring in concert. We carefully put the nugget in the place where Joe had kept it and then turned in ourselves.

In the morning we got Joe to show us the last place where he had seen his treasure. When his eyes fell upon the nugget a more astonished man you never saw in your life. Then to the wondering crowd we told the story of how we had found it.

THE EXPERT BURGLAR.

Click! Click! Click!

Then there was a strange silence, save for an occasional rustling of the ivy outside and the whisper of a fine rain as it fell amidst the leaves clinging about the window-sill.

Click! Click! Click!

Again the sound broke the stillness. This time louder and sharper than before.

Geoffrey Lefroy rubbed his eyes lazily and blinked spasmodically in the semidarkness. Then again he heard the noise.

It was unmistakable. Some one was attempting an entry into the dining-room. Silently he slipped on his bedroom slippers, then cautiously creeping to his bedroom window he gently pulled aside the blind and gazed in the direction of the room below.

His sleeping-apartment was situated immediately above the dining-room, and from his position he commanded a perfect view of the nocturnal visitor.

The rain had ceased, and a half-moon broke through the rift of racing clouds. In the light of the moon Lefroy perceived a dark figure bending over the window-sill. For some moments the man worked with conscientious energy, then with the scientific accuracy of an experienced burglar he suddenly slipped the catch with a knife.

With a glow of admiration Lefroy watched the man crawl into the room, and a second later he heard the window quietly closed. In an instant Lefroy switched on the electric light, and the next moment his eyes rested upon an army revolver hanging on a nail against the wall.

He stretched out his hand and obtained the weapon, then silently gliding into his study, which was the next room to his bedroom, he walked to his desk, where he remained a few minutes. Then he cautiously crept down the stairs.

Everything was still. There was absolute silence as Lefroy tiptoed toward the door and peered through the slit. A man was at the sideboard packing a bag full of the various valuables belonging to Lefroy.

"Hello!" said Lefroy, as he entered.

The effect was instantaneous.

"It's all right, guv'nor," he gasped. "I'm in your power. You've copped me splendid."

"Will you kindly place those things back upon the sideboard," said Lefroy, as he switched on the electric light.

"With pleasure, sir," replied the burglar. "Only too pleased to oblige."

The burglar stooped down and prepared to do as he was commanded, while Lefroy waved the revolver dangerously near his head.

Suddenly the burglar stopped. He rose to his full height —over six feet—and looked Lefroy sarcastically up and down; then, placing his hand in his breast pocket, he withdrew a slung-shot.

"Put that back, you idiot," cried Lefroy, "or I promise you I'll fire."

The burglar refused. He chuckled.

"Your impertinence is astounding," replied the burglar. "Do you think I am afraid of that apparently dangerous weapon?"

"You'll get a bullet in your leg if you don't put that thing back into your pocket," answered Lefroy.

"My dear sir," came a refined voice from the direction of the burglar, "may I inform you that the tables are completely turned. You are in my power. If you think I am afraid of that revolver you are pointing so dangerously in my direction, you are greatly mistaken. The top is covered with a thick dust, which proves you picked it up hurriedly, and that you employ a housemaid who neglects her duties; besides, I don't suppose you keep loaded revolvers lying about the house. However, I'll risk that. Fire if you wish to; I don't care. Go on, fire away; fire away."

It was Lefroy's turn to look surprised, and he gazed at the burglar with an expression of wonder. In a moment he realized he was entirely at the burglar's mercy.

The burglar raised his hand and pulled off a false beard and mustache, then took off his cap, which had been pulled closely over his eyes.

Lefroy found himself gazing into the handsome face of a young man of about twenty-five, and he could not suppress a gasp of astonishment.

"Great Scott!" gasped Lefroy.

"Pray, don't be concerned on my account," said the burglar. "If you will kindly obtain me a cigar and a whisky and soda I should be extremely obliged."

For a moment Lefroy was inclined to hesitate, but the burglar strode up to him and waved the slung-shot in the air.

"I think you'll agree," he said, "that I am stronger than you, so it will pay you better in the end to do exactly as I tell you."

Both were silent. The burglar poured himself out a stiff dose of whisky, lit a cigar, then, turning to Lefroy, said:

"Have a drop, old man."

"No, thanks," snapped Lefroy, who was disgusted with the man's impudence.

"These cigars aren't up to much," said the burglar. "I should advise you to change your tobacconist if you desire to keep the friendship of your guests."

Lefroy gazed at the man savagely.

"Look here," said Lefroy suddenly, "I'll own I'm in your power. You'll probably take all my stuff, and I shall be unable to interfere."

"Not necessary, old chap," replied the burglar, with a ring of sarcasm in his voice; "if there is any article which you specially prize—a present from a maiden aunt or a bachelor friend—I don't object to leaving it. I think your kind hospitality deserves some slight remuneration."

"I don't want that," said Lefroy. "I'm a journalist by profession, and what I want you to do is to give me a few tips about burglars. I can see you aren't an ordinary common burglar."

"It would indeed be a pleasure," answered the burglar. "Ask as many questions as you desire."

"How long have you been at the game?" said Lefroy.

"Since I was a nipper of twelve."

"Ever been caught?"

"Only once, and on that particular occasion they recognized my skill, for I was conducted from my prison cell to open a strong room which defied both the locksmiths and the owners, who had forgotten the complicated combination by which the door had been securely locked some months previous."

"Only been caught once, eh?" muttered Lefroy. "How do you account for your success in avoiding the police?"

"Because I'm not a fool," answered the burglar. "I've had a good education. I went to college. Look at me now. Who would take me for a burglar?"

He threw off his overcoat, and Lefroy saw that the man was wearing an evening dress of the latest fashion.

"In my pocket I have an opera-hat," he went on. "Should I have been disturbed to-night I should have popped over the wall, slipped off my disguise, and come strolling along as if nothing had happened."

"A good idea," said Lefroy.

"I do not wish to be conceited, but as a safe-opener I am a genius. I say this in no sense of glorification, but I consider myself the king of thieves. I have been the leading spirit in almost every recent great robbery in Gotham. I appear as an elegant man of fashion, and my munificence makes me an idol among the servants at the houses I visit."

"You interest me immensely," interrupted Lefroy.

"I don't rush headlong into things. I do my work on a scientific scale. I always take things gently. I know exactly the intelligence of the detectives, and I play them up with false clues, and sit at home laughing till my sides positively ache at the hopeless way they follow them up and the terrible muddle in which they find themselves a few days after the robbery."

"I cannot help admiring you," said Lefroy, who seemed somewhat agitated. "Have another cigar."

"Thanks, they are rather better than I thought. I'll take the box," answered the man, as he slipped the fifty into his overcoat pocket, "but as you have been so kind to me, ere I go may I give you a few tips with reference to the precautions you should take against burglary?"

"Pray proceed," said Lefroy.

"I would suggest that you bolt your doors both top and bottom, lock all the doors and take the key out, for the key, when left in the door, is a great help to the burglar in fixing his pliers. Patent burglar-alarms are very good, but the best precaution is a good house-dog."

The next moment two figures clad in the regulation garb of policemen entered the room.

"Personally I think the telephone is the best precaution against burglars," said Lefroy slowly, as he turned to the policemen.

The burglar looked as if he would like to kill Lefroy.

"I'm copped," he snarled, "but how did you do it?"

"Quite right," answered Lefroy. "I rang up the nearest police-station before I came down to you, and asked them to send a couple of policemen. I gave the address, and they arrived just in the nick of time."

Then the burglar was led to the door.

"Good night, officers." Then, turning to the burglar, Lefroy said: "Good night. By the bye, it isn't always the scientific burglar that evades the law or the man that sits quietly at home and laughs at the Scotland Yard authorities. It was my intention to detain you with the revolver until the police arrived, but you were too smart for that and saw it was unloaded. So I hit upon the game of keeping you in conversation. I hope you enjoyed my whisky and cigars. I'm thinking you won't get such a luxury for many months to come. Eh? Well, I suppose I shall see you to-morrow at your trial. Good night. Pleasant dreams."

OCEAN TRAGEDIES OF TO-DAY.

There is a popular impression that those who go to sea in ships nowadays are practically as safe as travelers by railway, and safer than the speeding motorist. But any one who frequents the docks, and talks with deep-sea sailormen in their haunts ashore, knows that the deep-sea "windjammer" still meets with all the dangers and adventures that Clarke Russell wrote about.

At Liverpool, the other day, the story of an amazing voyage of the sailing-ship *Australasia* was told in the police court. The captain was charged with wounding the second mate with a revolver, and it was alleged that he was insane at the time. Three colored seamen were convicted of mutinous conduct, and the boatswain was sent to jail for firing a revolver, to the danger of the crew. It was evident that there had been pandemonium aboard, and the only wonder is that the ship ever reached port.

One of the most thrilling of recent ocean tragedies was the burning of the British bark *Carnarvon Castle*, in the Indian Ocean, early in the present year. Under the name of the *Red Rock*, this bark was notorious for making the slowest passage on record from Liverpool to San Francisco and the west coast of South America. Her name was changed, in the hope of giving her better luck, but on her very first voyage as the *Carnarvon Castle* she burst suddenly into a mass of flames, more than seven hundred miles from the nearest land, on the Australian coast.

The men had to take to the boats within a few minutes, ill-supplied. They were nineteen days making the land, and for over ten days they were practically without food or water. Two men died at sea of hunger and thirst, and an apprentice succumbed to exhaustion soon after landing at an Australian lighthouse.

The sailors—all pious Welshmen—often sang hymns and prayed fervently. Sharks followed the boat constantly. During the last days some of the men drank sea-water frequently. It has always been supposed that this produces madness, but it did not do so in their case. Some ate their leather belts; others cut them up, and smoked the leather in their pipes.

When I was at Bridegtown, Barbados, a few years ago, a Brazilian bark came into the roadstead steered by a young Spanish girl of eighteen—a passenger. The captain and all the crew, save the mate and two sailors, were dead of beri-beri, the most terrible of diseases at sea. The three survivors of the crew were almost in the last extremity, for they also had been attacked by the malady. The mate was lying on the poop, unconscious. He had given over the wheel to the girl twenty-three hours before, and she had brought the ship into port on the trade wind.

The mate recovered, and it transpired that there was a romance in the affair which no nautical novelist could beat. He had fallen in love with the girl on the voyage, and they had been married by the skipper after beri-beri broke out, and they thought they were all doomed.

A friend of my own stood at the wheel of the full-rigged ship *Wray Castle* for thirteen hours at a stretch, while the crew fought flames that roared up to the main-yard from the hold. After eighteen hours' incessant toil and ceaseless danger, they saved the ship. Twice the boats were made ready; but "Come on, boys; another try!" said the gallant mate. The conquering of this fire was one of the bravest deeds in modern sea life.

This same friend of mine has only been going to sea for seven years, but already he has been in two wrecks, three fires, a collision, a stoke-hold mutiny, and twice on a steamer with a broken propeller.

No; man has certainly not chained the restless sea yet.

PUGNACIOUS BIRDS.

The tiger-bird, so called because it is the one thing the royal beast of India fears, is no larger than an English sparrow, yet so bold and combative is this bird of the Orient that if the great cat is surprised by a sufficient number of the little creature's kind far from the protecting shelter of the jungle, it will go hard with him. When alone, the bird will not attack. Supported by a flock of friends, however, often numbering several thousand, the bird will seek out his hereditary foe and give battle. On such occasions the tiger seeks safety in flight. A hand thrust into a cage filled with these little gamesters will elicit a furious assault from their combined forces. Assembled en masse they know no fear.

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